Way of the Ninja

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Summary

The journey of Konoha's most unpredictable ninja, Uzumaki Naruto, who strives to become the village's greatest Hokage.

However, this time around, the blonde genin has more to hide than just the Fox.

Notes

Some of you may recognize this from deviantart.com (it is posted under my Watashi-no-nindo gallery).

I've given a lot of thought about posting it here; in fact, I was very hesitant due to the fact it was posted without my consent on ff.net. Eventually, I figured it was past time I stopped fretting over it and just go ahead and do it.

Who knows, perhaps posting it here (and editing it as I go) will help spur me into writing new chapters.

In the interim, feel free to check it out (along with my other works) on deviantart!
Prologue - To become Hokage

Sarutobi absolutely loved days like this. With his paperwork for the day finished early, he was able to avail himself of the gorgeous weather and mingle with the people of his village. He'd shared a lovely conversation with Mister and Misses Takeda who were out for their morning walk. He'd also had the pleasure of chatting up the lovely Nakamura twins while they were on their way to the women's bath (hee!). Eventually his steps led him off the beaten path, just inside the village gates to a small section of trees off the edge of the road.

The one considered the strongest in the village had received many a greeting and kind word from passersby, but as he neared the old tree several meters away from the road, his eyes saddened at what he knew awaited him there.

"As nice as it is to sit and enjoy the nice weather we're having," He arrived at the tree's base, staring upwards into the large dark foliage above his head. His keen eyes found what he sought almost immediately, softening in slight bemusement. "Shouldn't you be in class right now?" he called out.

There were a few terse moments of silence before branches shifted, revealing a messy mop of blonde hair peaking down at him. The Hokage's amusement faded at the eyes staring back down at him. No child's gaze should hold such jadedness, such world-weariness... it was just unnatural.

After a moments of quiet contemplation, the blonde's expression shifted to amused resignation. "Uhuru-sensei kicked me out." came the reply. The way it was spoken would have lead most people to assume that it didn't really matter, but the Hokage knew differently. He wasn't Hokage for nothing, after all.

He studied the youth and frowned, taking note of the slight swelling on the child's face. Had the teacher actually struck one of her students? That would not do..."I see," he murmured. "I will just have to have a word with Uhuru-sensei and correct this problem."

The child paused, studying the older man with curious eyes. "Why would you do that?"

The Hokage blinked and then smiled. "I'm the Hokage," he answered. "It's my job to help everyone and make sure that they're safe and happy."

The blonde paused and then frowned before rising up and jumping down to the ground with a level of agility even some seasoned ninja didn't possess."Oh yeah...?" The child strode up to him, studying him with a measuring look. "If you really help everybody like you say, help her over there."

A tiny hand pointed out to beyond the trees, revealing a small pink-haired girl sitting in the grass. She looked to be about the same age as the blonde, her clothes dusty and rumpled, her messy rose locks shielding a face red and splotchy with tears. She continued to keen and cry, oblivious to their scrutiny.

"She's been like that a while," the blonde offered by way of explanation. "She was here even before me..."

The Hokage sighed sadly. He recognized her as the Haruno girl; she'd often been a victim of teasing by her peers because of the family traits she'd inherited - namely the pink hair and large
forehead. Kids were often cruel, he knew; sadly, there wasn't much he could do. Seeing the blonde's expectant look, he rustled the messy locks affectionately, earning a half-hearted grunt of complaint.

"Well...?"

He sighed,"I'm afraid that hers is not a problem that can be solved with my power." The blonde balked at this. "Sometimes people do things regardless of how they will affect others... Even though I am Hokage, I can't make people treat each other with kindness--"

"Arrrgghh, people can be so dumb!" The Hokage's eyes fell on the blonde in surprise, taking note of the blue eyes shining with righteous indignation. So familiar... "Don't they know that's wrong? Why would they pick on her if she's a nice person?" There was a pause. "Is it... 'cuz she's a girl..."

At that moment, the Sandaime Hokage felt all his years of age. He stared down at the blonde, barely five years of age, dressed in a shirt and shorts made clearly for someone far larger and older. At first glance, no one would possibly be able to tell that this child, too, was a girl. However, everyone knew that she too was often a victim of teasing and sometimes downright cruelty. Yet, despite the treatment she received, her concerns lay with a girl she barely knew.

She was certainly something else...

"People aren't perfect," he responded.

"That's no excuse!" came the retort. The blonde huffed, crossing her short arms over her chest. "Some Hokage you are!" Her eyes narrowed, her gaze assessing him carefully. "I bet I could do your job loads better!"

Pushing his dark thoughts away, the Sandaime Hokage schooled his expression to one of patient amusement. "Is that so?"

The blonde nodded eagerly, rubbing her nose. "You bet! I'm gonna get strong and protect everyone! I'm gonna be the greatest Hokage ever - Uzumaki Naruto!"

That brought the Sandaime up short. "Naru... to...?"

A confident grin stole across the child's face. "That way, no one'll pick on me for bein' a girl! I'm gonna get stronger and prove to everybody that I can be a great ninja - believe it!"

In the distance, the Haruno girl ceased her tears as she was confronted by another blonde - the Hokage believed her to be of the Yamanaka brood - who offered some words that brought a tentative smile to her face. The little blonde beside him took all this in, her grin never wavering. However, there was a wistfulness in her blue eyes that even he could not miss.

"Hey, Ojii-san?"

"Hm?"

The blonde scratched her head, shuffling a small sandaled foot in the grass. "I'm not gonna get in trouble for this, am I?"

Whether she was referring to her life goal or current state of truancy, Sarutobi wasn't certain. Of course, in the long run it didn't really matter. To think that someone so young, who had faced such hardships, would aspire to such a noble goal. Sarutobi's eyes were wide as he stared at the child in front of him in stunned silence. However, her belief that her ridicule was a result of her gender
alone...
'Why is it you have been forced to lead such a life...?' He gazed at the uncertainty in her eyes and his heart felt a deep sadness. He knew that despite her youthful reasonings, there was some validity to her plan. She would undoubtedly be safer if people did not know she was a girl - at least until she was strong enough to look after herself.

His power as Hokage would allow him to do this for her at least. He softened his gaze, causing the child to blink at him questioningly. "Of course not," he finally answered, "This old man will help you as much as he can."

Watching the gratitude bloom across her face brought him some comfort, but Sarutobi knew her problems were far from over. Still, not wanting to dwell on such depressing thoughts - despite her age, the child was incredibly astute and observant - he took her hand gently in his and gave her a smile. "All right, now that we have that settled, I believe it's time we see about getting you a new teacher. I have just the one in mind, too - you've going to like him."

The child nodded her head eagerly. "Okay!"

End Prologue
Chapter 1: Iwano-sama

Chapter Summary

The newly formed Team 7 gets its first evaluation.
Jounin Sensei Hatake Kakashi gets some food for thought.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 1

The figure quickly made his way through the forest, nimbly jumping from tree to tree without disturbing a single leaf. Covering a great distance in only a short span of minutes, he eventually landed nimbly on a large branch. He scanned the trees briefly for any other signs of human life before reaching for the small communication device secured in his ear.

"This is Scout One, state your position."

There was a cackle of static followed shortly by, "Scout Two, in position."

"Scout Three also in position," confirmed another.

There was a long stretch of silence, forcing the figure to sigh heavily in exasperation. "Scout Four, what is your position?"

The ear piece cackled loudly with static and feedback, coupled with the tell-tale sounds of someone trying to properly adjust their radio, before a voice cheerfully responded, "Scout Four's 'bout 20 yards from the checkpoint with the package secure, Sen-- er, Scout One!"

The scout leader nodded in acknowledgement, "We're ready to move in then," His hands formed a sign for the transportation jutsu. "Let's go!"

Three other voices cried out in unison, "Ryoukai!"

Each one vanished from sight.

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A small blonde dressed in orange stood alone on the forest path, keen blue eyes watching the surrounding area for any signs of attack. Before long there was a slight rustle in some nearby bushes that spurred the figure to draw a kunai from a pouch at his thigh, hurling it in that direction with a loud cry of, "Show yourself!"

The kunai flew straight and true, narrowly missing a dark haired youth's neck by inches. An accompanying pink haired girl screeched at the sight.

The dark haired youth fixed the blonde with an angry glare. "Watch it, moron."

The blonde stared at him with a squinted eyed glare before pointing an accusing finger in his face.
"Wrong! That's not the password, Sasuke-bastard!"

Silence fell over the trio before the pink-haired girl strode over to the blonde, her eyes alight with righteous anger. "YOU IDIOT!!" came her high pitched growl, accompanied by the sound of a fist hitting flesh. The blonde yowled more in surprise than pain. "You could have hurt Sasuke-kun!" A dark look from him encouraged her to amend her statement. "That is...you would have... if Sasuke-kun weren't such a good ninja already..."

Said ninja looked away with an annoyed huff.

The blonde recovered from the blow quickly, looking up at the girl beseechingly. "But Sakura-chaaan," came the whining reply. "I was just doing my job!"

Sakura looked ready to disagree, but anything she may have had to say was interrupted by the appearance of their Jounin sensei, an older, silver haired ninja with the majority of his face obscured by a black face mask and hitai-ate covering his left eye. His uncovered eye took in the three youths before him, drooping slightly in resigned amusement. "Now, now, children..." The emphasis on 'children' did not go unnoticed by his three subordinates, the smallest in particular. The silver-haired turned his attention on the blonde, his eye questioning. "Speaking of jobs, Naruto... I recall you saying the package was secure...?"

The blonde snapped to attention, nodding eagerly. "That's right, Kakashi-sensei, safe and sound!"

There was a long stretch of silence before Kakashi finally relented and sighed, "Where...?"

Naruto blinked. "Oh yeah!" The other three members of the group let out heavy sighs as the blonde turned from the group and ran over to a large tree in the distance. Drawing out a kunai and tapping on the trunk three times, the blonde called up into the branches, "All right, the coast is clear!"

Before long, an exact replica of the blonde hopped down to the ground, carrying an old woman on its back piggy-back style. The woman was dressed in a simple traveling yukata, her gray hair pulled up in a plain knot at the back of her head. Setting her down on the ground gently and giving her a quick once over to assure the was unharmed, it gave a fox-like grin and vanished into a poof of smoke.

The old woman pushed a few stray bangs out of her weathered face, letting out a giddy laugh. "Well now, wasn't that fun!" Reaching for the traveling pack on her back, she tugged free a walking stick that she had secured under one of its flaps. Turning unusually pale blue eyes in the blonde's general direction, she smiled and asked, "So, are we ready to move on?"

Naruto opened his mouth to respond, only to be cut off by a fuming Sakura. Seeing her expression, he took a quick step back, arms tensing to protect his head from further trauma.

"Naruto..." she said in clipped tones. "You did NOT hide our client up in a tree...?!" Though she maintained the illusion of calm, Inner Sakura raged, *

YOU BIG APE? DON'T YOU HAVE ANY MANNERS AT ALL?! SHAAAA!*

The blonde blinked at her innocently. "What? We both thought it was a good idea... 'Sides, it's not like I left her up there by herself."

Kakashi, meanwhile, had to struggle not to laugh. The blonde certainly deserved the title of Most Unpredictable ninja... His grades in the Academy had been abysmal, hence his status as 'Dead Last'. Yet since joining the ranks of Team 7, he had shown that he possessed the ability to find unique ways to go about solving a problem. For instance, their current mission involved escorting
an old woman to visit her daughter and son in law outside of the village. It was assumed that as a member of the Konoha Council (she had taken the seat once her husband passed on - at least that is what Kakashi had been told ) Iwano Miyako was to be treated with a certain amount of decorum and respect.
The Jounin still remembered the stern lecture Iruka had given the blonde before introducing them to their client. However, oddly enough, before leaving the village the old woman insisted that she was not to be coddled under any circumstances... even if she was blind.

'I suppose Naruto's just following her instructions,' the silver haired ninja mused. He couldn't let Sakura pummel the poor kid for heeding her request. Besides, it wasn't as if she'd come to any harm under his care - as a matter of fact, she seemed to be having quite the time. How unusual...

"It's all right, Sakura," he said finally. "Naruto did just fine."

It was hard to say who looked more surprised by his words. "But Kakashi-sensei!" Sakura exclaimed. "What if she had fallen out of the tree?"

Naruto pouted. "You saw - I had a Kage Bunshin with her!"

"Now, now," the old woman interjected, feeling outwards until her hand found Sakura's shoulder to give it a reassuring pat. "You needn't worry about me, dear girl. I'm blind, not made of glass." Sakura had the good nature to blush in embarrassment, muttering a soft apology. The old woman smiled and then turned her head towards Kakashi. "Shall we move on, Hatake-san?"

What an interesting old lady... Kakashi chuckled. "Yes, ma'am."

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Without any further adieu, the five of them continued their trek back to the village. There hadn't been any altercations thus far, but knowing they still had to be wary of bandits (Iwano-san well known as a very influential and wealthy woman in Hi no Kuni) Kakashi and Sakura took the lead, while Sasuke brought up the rear, leaving Naruto to walk alongside Iwano-san in the middle. Neither one seemed to be troubled by the arrangement.

Kakashi pondered this as he leafed through the pages of his precious Icha Icha Paradise. Initially, charging Naruto with the guarding of their client whilst the others scouted the area had been meant as a tests of sorts, to see whether or not the blonde could be trusted to behave as a ninja should in these types of situations. After all, ever since meeting the kid, Kakashi had been well aware that manners were not something he used in abundance. It was his hope that the experience would be humbling... for him and the client. Despite his duty to the village, Kakashi had always found the politicians to be a nuisance. Many of them had never had to lift a kunai in their lives; they were ignorant and uncaring of the trials shinobi had to undergo just to keep their homes safe.

He'd expected Iwano to be no different - an uptight, snobbish old woman with too much baggage (figurative and literal) and more demands than a 3-man cell of 12 year olds could hope to carry out. Surprisingly enough, Iwano Miyako hadn't met a single one of his expectations. She'd arrived with only the pack on her back and an eager grin to get on the road. Upon learning that most of her trip would be spent in the company of Naruto (he'd almost felt guilty at the look of apprehension that skirted across the blonde's face, hidden quickly under his patented squinty eyed expression), the old woman had only nodded, bowed, and dove into a tale about her last trip to Kusagakure. And as expected of someone who had never left the country, let alone the village, the blonde had given her his undivided attention.

"...about how far are we now, Hatake-san?"
Speaking of undivided attention... He glanced down from his book, glancing back at the old woman. "We're not far from the village now, Iwano-sama," he supplied.

"Oh good. I must say this has been an enjoyable trip." she smiled, turning an inquiring glance in his direction. "I trust it was educational for your students?"

That almost brought him up short. It was true that this was the first escort mission Team 7 had undertaken, but how had she known that? If they'd told her that back when the mission was assigned, wouldn't she have asked for a team with more experience? That's what most politicians would have done. It seemed Iwano Miyako was of the unpredictable sort as well...

Sakura turned back with a puzzled expression on her face. "Educational?" she asked.

Iwano-san grinned. "Why yes! Your sensei was drilling you on reconnaissance wasn't he? A ninja must always have keen observation skills - in fact, it's one of the most important skills they can have. Surely your teachers taught you that?"

"Of course he did!" Naruto exclaimed.

Kakashi resisted the urge to roll his eyes, though he was certain Sakura and Sasuke did not. For someone who did so poorly in school, it was surprising how much the blonde looked up to their old Chunin instructor, Umino Iruka. Turning a page in his book, he decided to contribute to the conversation. "Ninja rule number one - a ninja must always look underneath the underneath."

Iwano-san nodded enthusiastically. It was strange to see in someone so old; the woman was healthy (no doubt due to her excursions outside the village), but she had to be at least 70! "A ninja must be able to see through deception. They must be keen, alert at all times. Even though I am blind, I consider myself to be very observant. To make up for my lack of sight, my other senses have honed themselves to point where sight almost seems unnecessary."

She paused, allowing her listeners to take all this in. Sakura and Naruto looked up at her in awe, while Sasuke maintained a steady air of indifference. Iwano continued on, "For instance, Hatake-san, I can hear each page you turn in that book of yours." Kakashi paused, glancing back at the almost knowing grin on her face. "It must be very interesting - your heart is beating very quickly."

'Damn, she's good.' His three genin fixed him with bland stares, resulting in his giving a crescent-eyed grin.

"But there's more to being a ninja than just knowing how to observe others," Iwano said, her tone and posture much like a teacher giving a lecture despite her hand been affixed to Naruto's shoulder in lieu of her walking stick. "What you must also know... is how to act when you are being observed."

Intrigued, Kakashi put his book away.

"For example, as a member of our village's Council, I am a very important dignitary, yes?" she asked. "If another politician, powerful like myself, planned to attend an event in a dangerous territory how would they go about requesting assistance? For the person responsible for assigning missions, the first thought would be to hire out some big flashy guard detail, yes?"

The Jounin remained silent, waiting to see what his students would say.

It was silent a few seconds before the Uchiha responded with his usual grunt, followed by, "It depends."
Iwano turned her head back his direction. "Yes?"

"On a number of things," Sakura replied. "What kind of dignitary are you? Are you the type that has a lot of enemies? Where is the event being held? All of these things are taken into consideration when the mission is assigned a rank."

"This is true, my dears," Iwano-san smiled patiently. "But I believe you are missing my point." Both Sakura and Sasuke looked surprised. Naruto looked slightly puzzled. "If your client is the kind bound to draw a lot of unfriendly attention, is it wise to hire every able-bodied Chunin and Jounin to guard them?"

Catching on to the point she was trying to get across, Kakashi smiled beneath his mask. "High-security escort missions are usually assigned to a small number of ninja, exclusively to those who can get the client to and from their destination quickly, quietly, and safely."

Sasuke smirked at the blonde walking a few feet ahead of him, beside their client. "Doubt you'll be seeing any missions like that, moron."

Naruto turned to him with a growl. "What're you tryin' ta say, asshole?!" Sasuke only snorted in response, inciting the blonde's anger even further. It was only Iwano-san's hand still resting on his shoulder that kept him from lashing out in retaliation.

"Naruto!" Sakura barked. "Don't you yell at Sasuke-kun!"

Kakashi sighed. How predictable. Hoping to avoid any unnecessary altercations between the two, the silver haired Jounin turned back to the old woman. "You were saying, Iwano-sama?"

"Oh yes," Iwano said. "One of the greatest tools in a ninja's arsenal is the element of surprise. The point I was trying to make is that sometimes the best person for the job is the one that the enemy would least exepct..." She paused, turning her head to the blonde beside her. "Take Uzumaki-kun for example..."

That certainly brought the rest of Team 7 up short. "What?"

The squinty eyed expression returned to Naruto's face, but Kakashi couldn't help but notice it looked somewhat more forced than usual.

"These roads are notorious for being fraught with bandits looking to rob a defenseless old woman like me," She paused and grinned. "Surely they wouldn't expect to find me hiding in a tree?"

Valid reasoning, no matter how ridiculous it sounded.

Iwano-san went on. "Uzumaki-kun is quite a creative ninja, I find." She turned back to him, oblivious to the strange expression on his whiskered face. Even Kakashi wasn't sure what to make of it. "I've heard a bit about your exploits back in the village, as well... I can tell that your teammates don't seem to think much of your skills, but to be able to deface a national monument in broad daylight is a feat not many ninja can boast..."

A proud smirk made its way across the blonde's face.

Both Sakura and Sasuke groaned.

"But he eventually got caught, you know..." Sakura supplied.

This much was true, Kakashi thought. However, from what he'd heard from colleagues it was his
school teacher, Umino Iruka who had apprehended him after the deed was done. Somehow, the blonde had been able to evade both seasoned Jounin and ANBU after committing the act. Iwano-san was right - how many genin could attest to that?

"All the same," Iwano replied, smiling at Naruto. "It is my belief that you have the makings of a great ninja."

Naruto ran a hand through his messy blonde locks, laughing abashedly. "You bet I do, Obaa-san!" he crowed. "Some day I'm gonna be the GREATEST ninja - Uzumaki Naruto, future Hokage!"

Kakashi glanced back at them, a thoughtful glint in his eye.

Iwano glanced up at him. "Is something wrong, Hatake-san?" she asked. His students' eyes turned to him as well.

"No," he replied. "Everything's fine."

"You hear what she said, Sakura-chan?" Naruto grinned at his pink-haired teammate, chest puffed up in pride. "Obaa-san says I'm gonna be a great ninja! Can you believe that? Huh?"

The look on her face obviously said no. She scoffed at him, "Not if you don't stop behaving like a complete doofus. Painting faces on the Hokage Monument... honestly..."

The blonde instantly deflated. "Sakura-chaaaaan..."

Kakashi glanced up ahead, taking in the sight of the large gate in the distance. They were upon them within mere minutes, and after checking in with the two Chunin at the check post, they entered into the familiar village of Konoha.

"Ah, we've arrived, Iwano-sama." he replied, stopping and turning to face their client.

She inclined her head, taking in the sounds of the bustling village around them and then nodded her head satisfactorily. "Very good. A job well done, Team Seven."

"Would you like for us to escort you home, Iwano-sama?" Sakura offered.

Iwano-san smiled. "That won't be necessary, dear." she answered. "I know this village like the back of my hand - I'm sure I'll be just fine." She gave them a curteous bow. "Thank you for your assistance. You've made this old lady's trip very interesting."

Interesting was not the word he would have chosen, but Kakashi supposed it would have to do. At her bow, he inclined his head politely. "It was our pleasure, Iwano-sama. Don't hesitate to call on us again should you need us." With that said, he turned to leave, his students trailing behind him.

Iwano made to walk away as well, but stopped and turned back to them. "Oh, Uzumaki-kun!" All the members of Team 7 stopped, looking back. Naruto only blinked. "I wish you luck in your goal of becoming the first female Hokage! Kami knows it'll be about time!" She bowed once more, and then walked away humming an old tune under her breath.

No one spoke for several moments.

Once again, Sasuke was the one to break the silence with a grunt. "What a weird old woman." he said finally.

Glad that the mood had been broken, Kakashi let out a soft chuckle. "She certainly was
interesting." He turned his gaze back to his subordinates, 'grinning' faintly. "Well, team, I declare this mission a success." He fished into his side pouch, drawing out his beloved book once more. "I'm going to go report in - meet me at the bridge tomorrow at 9 for our next assignment."

The three knew they wouldn't see him until noon, but they nodded nonetheless.

Naruto let out a little squeal of victory, bouncing up and down as if they had not just spent the whole day walking. "Yes! Mission accomplished! I gotta go tell Iruka-sensei!" With that he dashed off, no doubt to drag the unsuspecting teacher off to Ichiraku to recount his current exploits. Kakashi grinned.

Watching him go, Sakura huffed slightly. "What a weirdo! I don't get him at all!" Who did, really? She turned to Sasuke, who merely stared elsewhere with a bored look on his face, then to Kakashi who was about to poof away. "Shouldn't he have flipped out at Iwano-sama for calling him a girl?"

Kakashi glanced away from his book at the question. It certainly seemed like the kind of reaction the blonde would have - look at how he reacted when someone mentioned his height (or lack thereof)? It wasn't as if he could blame him for being upset... who wanted to be the shortest genin as well as the last in the graduating class? However, given how well he seemed to have gotten along with Iwano-sama and the good behavior he had displayed for the majority of the trip, perhaps Naruto had just decided to let it slide. After all, how mad could you get at someone for making that kind of error when they were blind?

"Hm," he answered. "Perhaps it's just a sign that Naruto's finally growing u---" He paused at his two remaining students' disbelieving stares and the fact that his words sounded ridiculous even to his own ears.

"...Nah."

Deeming the matter too unimportant to dedicate anymore time to, Sasuke turned to walk away. "I'm going home."

Of course, the kunoichi beside him perked up, trailing after him. "Sasuke-kun! Do you wanna--?"

"No."

Kakashi shook his head. He supposed not everyone could be as unpredictable as Naruto. Letting the matter drop, he headed to the Hokage Tower, disappearing in a swirl of leaves.

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"So, Kakashi, your team back from your mission?"

Kakashi glanced upwards, nodding his head at Asuma and Kurenai approaching him from down the hall, no doubt they were both reporting in from their own missions. "That's right." he answered.

The Jounin instructors of team 8 and 10 exchanged knowing looks.

Asuma grinned around his ever present cigarette. "So, how'd it go?"

Kakashi closed his eye in a grin. "It was... interesting."

Kurenai studied him with deep red eyes. "An escort mission, I take it?"

The silver haired Jounin nodded. "Council woman Iwano Miyako." At Asuma's laugh he paused.
"But I take it you already knew this."

"Since this is your first genin team, I'm sure you didn't know..." The bearded Jounin paused to take a drag from his cigarette. Kurenai frowned slightly at him in distaste.

'No luck getting him to quit yet, eh, Yuuhi-san?'

Flicking away a few embers, Asuma continued, "Iwano-sama likes to hire out the Genin teams to do missions for her - escorts mostly... She gives an evaluation to the Council on each team she hires - she's kind of like a final test for new Genin squads."

"A final test...?"

"That's correct." The three Jounin looked up to see the Hokage coming towards them down the hall. They all bowed, chorusing out "Hokage-sama" in unison. The old village head only smiled. "You three might not be aware of this, but Miyako-san is actually a retired ninja."

"Really?" Kurenai replied, eyes wide in surprise. "I hadn't known that..."

"I had my suspicions," Kakashi said. The others glanced at him. "She gave quite a lecture to my students on the advantages of good observation skills."

Sarutobi nodded. "An accident during a mission during her days as a genin left her blinded. However, rather than give up her career as a ninja, Miyako pushed herself and honed her other senses to compensate for her lack of sight. In fact, in her day Miyako was one of our finest tracking ninja. She led an hunting squad responsible solely for tracking down missing persons and nuke-nin." Sarutobi continued. A chuckle escaped him at the three Jounins' matching looks of surprise. "Although she's been retired for some time."

Kakashi recalled her words on their trek back to the village. ~ "To make up for my lack of sight, my other senses have honed themselves to point where sight almost seems unnecessary." ~

'I see,' he thought. 'By fine tuning all her other senses - sound, smell, taste, touch, chakra... she made it so she could find out all she needed without having to use her sight.' He smirked. 'She probably could have found her way without our help!'

"That said, what did Iwano-sama have to say about your students, Kakashi?" Kurenai asked, smiling.

Sarutobi glanced at him. Kakashi knew that what they really wanted to know was what she had to say about Naruto. It was no secret that many people - despite their views on his 'situation' - did not believe that he had what it took to be a proper ninja. Running around in bright orange and being the last in your class had the tendency to do that, he supposed.

He closed his eye. "She said they were interesting." Sarutobi made a sound of approval. "And she spent most of the trip with Naruto."

"Really?" Asume grinned, impressed. "And what did she have to say about Konohagakure's Number 1 Hyperactive Ninja?"

Kakashi paused, scratching his head. "She thinks he has what it takes to be the first female Hokage..."

Both Asuma and Kurenai balked in confusion. "Huh...?"
Sarutobi, to their surprise, laughed out loud. "Ah, that Miyako... always with the jokes..." There was a strange glint to the Hokage's eyes - quite similar to the expression Naruto had sported earlier. However, before Kakashi could question him about it, the old man was already walking away.

Watching him go, Asuma scratched at his beard with a puzzled expression on his face. "Well, maybe she's slipping in her old age..."

Kurenai only shrugged.

Kakashi could only wonder.

End Chapter 1

Chapter End Notes

Not too many edits this time 'round, although if you spot anything, please let me know!

As always, more of this work can be found on my devart page under the name Watashi-no-nindo!
Chapter 2: Little Girl

Chapter Summary

Team 7 learns the truth in the most unconventional of ways

Chapter 2

Despite swearing by the rule of looking 'underneath the underneath' Kakashi had known upon first meeting his students what kind of people they were. In fact, he’d slapped a label on each of them the moment he laid eyes on them.

_Uchiha Sasuke - Angsty Avenger_

_Haruno Sakura - Kunoichi Wannabe_

_Uzumaki Naruto - Brainless Prankster_

Of course, he quickly came to realize that he'd sorely underestimated them when they managed to be the first genin to pass his bell test. While he'd hated to admit that they'd shown themselves to possess a modicum of skill since then, he still stood by his previous assumptions as far as his first two students were concerned. The Uchiha spent most of his time sulking and brooding, disregarding everyone and everything that did not pertain to helping him achieve his 'goal'. Meanwhile Haruno followed after him like a love sick puppy, taking his rejections in stride, never once considering the fact that he didn't seem to be interested in anything she had to offer him.

Predictable.

However, when it came to the blonde, Kakashi found himself a bit puzzled. Since becoming a Genin, Naruto had all but ceased his reign of prankster terror on the village. That wasn't to say he wasn't still as hyper and obnoxious as ever, but it lead Kakashi to believe that despite his fumbling, the kid was actually quite serious about becoming a ninja. And given the developments of their last mission, it looked as though he'd managed to earn himself a council woman's endorsement. To the surprise of everyone Iwano-sama believed Naruto had the potential to become a great ninja - Hokage even!

~ "One of the greatest tools in a ninja's arsenal is the element of surprise."
~ Iwano had said.
~"The point I was trying to make is that sometimes the best person for the job is the one that the enemy would least expect..."

And Naruto was nothing if not unpredictable.

"Aarrghhh, shut _UP_, asshole!!"

Kakashi glanced up from his book, staring down at his students from his perch on a large rock. Sakura and Sasuke currently stood at the foot of a large tree in the middle of the forest, matching looks of irritation directed at Naruto. Said blonde teammate was high above them in the same tree, cautiously edging outwards towards the striped cat resting on one of the further reaching branches.

Sasuke ignored the blonde's angry tone. "Hurry it up," he ground out. "You're wasting time!"
"That's right!" Sakura chimed in. "If you had just let Sasuke-kun go up there to get the cat, we would have been done ages ago!" She turned to Sasuke with a dreamy sigh, no doubt envisioning him carrying out daring rescues of said feline.

Sasuke ignored her as well.

Meanwhile Naruto ignored them both, turning his sights back to the cat with a slight pout on his face. "Stupid cat."

The Jounin turned his gaze to the blonde before turning his eye back to his reading. "Be careful up there, Naruto..." he cautioned. "A fall from that height could kill you."

The blonde continued to inch slowly towards the preening cat. "No worries, sensei," he grinned pointing out at the rushing river over which the branches of the tree extended. "There's always the water."

Kakashi paused and then frowned, muttering, "Like that's any better..." He sighed. 'And here I thought Iwano-sama had the right idea...'

~ "A ninja must be able to see through deception," ~ she had said. And yet, as a blind ninja skilled in the art of gathering information, she had somehow come to be convinced that Naruto was a girl. He frowned. Ruling out the thought of him trying to remain polite, the pair had spent the majority of the trip together - surely Naruto wouldn't let her come to such a conclusion without stopping to correct her.

Kakashi's mind conjured up an angry Naruto throwing a temper tantrum in front of the blind woman yelling, 'I'm a boy, damn it!' and he would have laughed had not the whole situation been so absurd. Naruto WAS a boy... so why hadn't he corrected her?

Oblivious to his thoughts, Naruto edged closer to the cat. Tensing his body, he sprung outwards, making a grab for the cat. "Gotcha, cat!" he crowed.

Down below, Sakura slapped a hand to her forehead. "Sheesh, Naruto, try to show a little more tact, please?"

"What're you talkin' about?" Naruto blinked, holding the cat in his arms, standing out on the branch. "I got the cat - see?" He held the animal outwards for her to see, but unfortunately the movement cause the cat to panic, clawing at his arms wildly. The blonde yelped in surprise, letting go of the animal only to have it jump down from the tree and land safely in Sasuke's arms.

Naruto, however, was not so lucky. The force the cat used to propel itself away from him sent him sprawling and windmilling backwards, knocking the back of his head on an overhead branch before tumbling down into the water below.

Sakura screamed, clapping her hands over her mouth in horror. "NARUTO!!"

The sound pulled Kakashi away from his book. Meeting his eye, the kunoichi pointed to the water. He jumped down the ground, his eye scanning the recently disturbed waters. Surely the kid could swim?

"He hit his head!" Sakura supplied, her green eyes light with worry. "He's unconscious!"

"Damn it!" Icha Icha was quickly tossed to the ground as the Jounin made his way into the water.

Sakura and Sasuke (and Tora-kun) waited anxiously by the water's edge for any sign of them. After
a few seconds they were rewarded as Kakashi quickly broke the surface and made his way back
towards the bank, a water logged Naruto in tow. Once he was far enough from the water, he set
Naruto down in the grass.

A frown was evident on Sasuke's face. "He's not breathing."

Tears sprung to Sakura's eyes as she turned to Kakashi anxiously. "Sensei...?"

Kakashi could hear his own heart pounding in his ears. Of all the... "Just stay back!" he snapped.
The two young genin obeyed as he pulled open their comrade's jacket. Prepared to initiate CPR, he
brought his hands together over blonde's chest, pausing for half a second when something suddenly
came to his attention. 'What...?! You're kidding?'

After a few repetitions, Naruto stirred, coughing up water. Gently Kakashi turned to blonde to the
side, patting his back.

Sakura let out a sigh of relief as their teammate slowly sat up, chest heaving. "Naruto... are you--?"
She paused, her words dying in her throat.

Jacket wide open and slick with water, Naruto appeared to be possession of two particular things
that boys were NOT supposed to have.

Sasuke's usual expression of annoyance was replaced by morbid confusion. "What... the hell...?"
The blonde, still groggy and disoriented, followed their gazes before letting out an 'eep' and
tugging the jacket shut with a fierce blush.

Kakashi's expression was void of emotion. "Sakura, Sasuke," His tone brooked no argument, and
the two youths snapped to attention. "Go back to the village and return Tora-kun to the Daimyo's
wife."

Sasuke glanced down, surprised to find he still held the content cat in his arms.

The Jounin stood up, brushing his wet hair back out of his eyes. "I'll make sure Naruto's all right
and then we'll catch up."

Sakura shifted uneasily. "But, Sense--"

"That was an order, Sakura."

The Uchiha nodded slightly before pushing a still hesitating Sakura in the direction of the village.

Kakashi waited until they were out of sight before closing his eye with a heavy sigh. "Well, now
that they're gone," He turned to the blonde, who sat looked decidedly small in the puddle of water
collecting at their feet. "How about you start explaining yourself... 'Naruto'..."

The blonde only gulped.

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With the help of a quick katon, Kakashi was able to start a quick fire and hang their heavier layers
of clothing up to dry on a branch. His eye took in the gaudy orange garment hanging next to his
jounin vest over the fire before falling to its owner. The blonde was sitting on a log opposite him,
staring sullenly into the flames. Despite all his years as a ninja, Kakashi still couldn't wrap his
mind around the situation. It seemed ridiculous to even assume that such a thing was possible, but
the proof was there right in front of him. Of course, without the bulky jacket on, it was much more obvious to see what Iwano had known all along.

Uzumaki Naruto WAS a girl.

He stared at the blonde, forcing him ('her' Kakashi's mind had to correct himself) to meet his eye. "So, you gonna start talking?"

Naruto looked away, frowning. "What do you expect me to say...?"

It was strange seeing the kid so subdued. Still, he was not to be deterred. This was a serious matter. "Well," he drawled. "You can start by telling me why you never mentioned that you were a girl."

The genin squinted angrily at the ground. "I never said that I wasn't!"

That was true. More pieces of the puzzle came together. "And that's why you never bothered to correct Iwano-sama."

Naruto glared up at him with piercing blue eyes. "You're the one who told me to 'see through deception', Kakashi-sensei!" So he had, during their bell test. "I thought you knew!"

He should have, and that bothered him greatly. "You weren't exactly broadcasting it," he said. 'Like most kunoichi tend to...'

"If anything," He studied her. "It seems like you were trying to hide that fact."

She flinched guiltily. "So what if people got the wrong idea!" she exclaimed. "I didn't lie!"

"All right then," the Jounin conceded. "Say I believe you," Naruto's face flashed in hurt before falling into an angry squint once again. "Who else knows?"

She paused, "Who else?" She scratched her head in thought. "Well... Hokage-jiji does... he said it was okay if I didn't tell anybody... He said I'd be safer."

That brought Kakashi up short. Why hadn't it occurred to him that that would be part of her reasoning? 'She's never been very well liked in the village because of her 'tenant'... it's no wonder she wanted to stay beneath the radar...'

Naruto continued on, "And Iruka-sensei knows, oh and so does Ichiraku-oyaji and Ayame-neesan!"

Iruka he could understand, but the owner of the Ichiraku Ramen stand and his daughter? "You told them but you didn't think to tell your own teammates?"

The blonde's eyes darkened as they met his. "It's not like either of them care..." she muttered in a tone that seemed so unlike Naruto. "And besides, Neesan figured it out on her own."

oo Flashback oo

A young blonde child scrambled up onto a stool at the ramen stand, grinning at the chef's daughter with whiskered cheeks. "Shrimp, chicken, and pork, please, Neesan!"

The older girl smiled down at the child. "Coming right up." She set about serving up the order, pausing to glance at the girl. "Naruto-kun?"

The child slurped up a helping of ramen before turning questioning blue eyes her way. "Yah, Neesan?"
Ayame smiled gently. "Your birthday was a the other day wasn't it?"

The blonde blinked and then looked down. "Yeah..."

Teuchi smiled sadly before nodding to Ayame. The brown haired cook reached underneath the counter before pulling out a small package and setting it next to the blonde. "Here you are... Happy belated birthday!"

Naruto blinked, staring at the package. At her encouraging nod, she slowly opened the package, pulling out a spiral pendant held on a leather rope. "This... is for me...?"

Ayame smiled. "Every girl needs something to make her feel pretty, ne?" She gave the younger girl a conspiratorial wink.

The younger girl stared at the pendant, unaware of the tears forming in the corner of her eyes. "Th... thank you..."

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Kakashi stared at the young blonde as her eyes came back into focus - what had she been remembering, he wondered - before she glanced back up at him.

"So," she said softly. "What now, Sensei?"

"Hm?"

She stared down at her feet, tugging absently at the grace beneath her. "Am I kicked out of Team 7 now?" The Jounin blinked. He hadn't expected that. "If so... please don't send Sakura-chan and Sasuke-teme back the Academy! It's my fault - I don't want them to get into trouble -- huh?"

Kakashi placed a hand on her head, stilling her words. "We in Team 7 do not abandon friends, Naruto. You forgot that already?"

Naruto blinked at him with wide blue eyes. "Kakashi-sensei...?" He couldn't tell if she were going to laugh or cry.

He rose to his feet. "We'd better head back," he replied. He glanced back at her with an eye grin. "They probably think I've tossed you back into the river."

Naruto only laughed weakly.

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Once their clothes were dry, the two made their way back to the village in silence. Upon reaching the gates once again, sure enough, Sakura and Sasuke awaited them.

Sakura spotted them first, pointing. "Look, there they are!"

Sasuke, who stood leaning against the wall with his eyes closed, opened one dark eye to fix them with a disinterested look before closing it again.

"Ah, Sasuke, Sakura," Kakashi said, feigning surprise. "You waited for us."

Sakura nodded, continuously shooting quick glances at Naruto. "We returned the cat to the Fire Daimyo's wife, Sensei. We just wanted to... well, we wanted... that is..." She struggled with herself before pointed an accusing finger at Naruto, exploding. "YOU'RE A GIRL?!"
In a surprising and unexpected move, Naruto jumped back behind Kakashi to hide.

Puzzled at her reaction, Kakashi waved a hand lazily. "Now, now... explanations will come later. For now, I'm sure Naruto just needs to go home and get a good re--" He turned back to glance at the blonde only to find him--her missing.

"Gone?" Sakura blinked in confusion. Even Sasuke looked surprised. "Where'd he... I mean she... where's Naruto?!"

A frown made its way across Sasuke's face as he stared at where the blonde had once stood. 'Naruto...'

End Chapter 2
Chapter 3: The girl's name is Naru

Chapter Summary

Kakashi does a little detective work

Chapter 3

By the time Naruto made her way down from the Hokage monument, the skies were a dusky red and the evening lanterns had already been lit. She was a bit surprised that she'd gone so long without being discovered - usually only an hour or two would go by before Iruka showed up to scold her for her latest act of mischief. As it was, she'd almost dozed off atop the head of the Yondaime Hokage - she felt most comfortable here for some reason - before realizing that no one would be coming for her.

A small pout made its way across her face. 'Why should anyone come?' she thought to herself. 'It's not like I did anything bad.'

And yet she'd run away from her teammates following the accidental discovery of her secret. While Kakashi had assured her on their trek back to the village that no harm would come from Sasuke and Sakura knowing her true gender, Naruto had been unable to hide the uneasiness she felt at their confused stares. There would be questions she knew - questions she could not give answers to. She had decided years ago to masquarade as a boy in order to protect herself. Why? Because people had a tendency to attack the small child who'd been unfortunate enough to be chosen to house the most feared and reviled of all Bijuu...

'Oh, she could only imagine what they'd have to say to that...'

'It's no big deal...' Naruto told herself, idly kicking at a pebble beneath her sandaled foot. She watched it bounce along one of the rocks making up the Yondaime's hair before vanishing from sight.

'Stupid Yondaime-sama...' Despite everything she'd learned that fateful night following graduation, deep down the girl could find no fault with the deceased Hokage. After all, wasn't it the duty of the village's ninja to protect everyone else? They had to be strong in face of all sorts of trials.

'That's gonna be my job someday,' She rose to her feet, brushing the dust from her pants. Making her way down the rocky cliffside, she slowly made her way back into the village proper, pulling her jacket back on as she went. It was still slightly damp, but Naruto didn't really mind - she'd dealt with far worse. 'I promised myself that I was gonna be a strong ninja...'

But what to do about her teammates? Would they still accept her knowing that she had kept such a secret from them? And what of her being a Jinchuuriki, should she tell them about that, too?

"No," She shook her head, thick blonde locks falling in her face to obscure her vision briefly. 'They don't need to know that. It's gonna be tough enough as it is.' A rueful grin made its way across her face. 'Let's just face one challenge at a time, ne?'

"Naruto... is that you over there?" The blonde looked back at the sound of approaching footsteps.
The Sandaime Hokage was coming towards her from the direction of the Hokage Tower, Iwano Miyako at his side.

Naruto cocked her head, taking in the blind woman's attire. Gone was the simple traveling yukata - instead the council woman was dressed in an elegant kimono, her hair done up in an elaborate bun with a jade comb holding the style in place. "Sandaime-jiji..." Her depressing thoughts momentarily forgotten, the blonde skipped up to the elderly couple with a foxy grin threatening to split her face. "You two on a date or somethin'?'"

Sarutobi blinked and then sputtered at the genin as Iwano let out an unexpected guffaw. "Oh goodness no, Uzumaki-kun!" she laughed. "You have such an active imagination!"

Naruto only grinned.

The Sandaime guided Iwano-sama forward so that she could give the blonde a greeting pat on the head. "Actually, Naruto," he explained. "Iwano-sama was just telling me about her recent trip with Team 7 as her escort. She told me she was quite impressed by you and your teammates."

The blonde beamed at the praise.

As if sensing this, Iwano grinned. "I meant what I told you earlier, Uzumaki-kun," she said. "You're going to make an excellent kunoichi." Shuffling her feet slightly, Naruto nodded and glanced down at the ground, her chipper mood diminished somewhat at the thought of facing her teammates again. At her silence, Iwano tilted her head in curiosity. "Have I said something wrong...?"

"Um, no..."

Sarutobi studied the blonde's face, a slight frown coming to his own. "I see that your teammates now know the truth."

Naruto nodded but did not lift her head.

Sightless eyes blinking, Iwano turned her head in the Sandaime's direction. "What do you mean, Sarutobi?"

Sarutobi sighed. "I believe that Naruto's teammates were unaware that she was a girl," He rubbed his beard, his expression speculative. "It was decided that that information should be kept a secret so that Naruto might be protected."

The councilwoman gasped. "Oh dear... and I went and gave you away!" She turned her head in Naruto's direction, a worried look on her face. "I am so sor--"

"S'all right, Obaa-san," Naruto interjected. She folded her arms behind her head, fixing the fox grin back in place. "It was bound to happen sooner or later." She would have much preferred later, but there wasn't much to be done about that now...

"What will you do now?" the Hokage asked.

Intense blue eyes met his. "I told you I was gonna surpass you some day, didn't I, jiji?" Sarutobi nodded, remembering the declaration made by the blonde all those years ago. "Now that my secret's out, it's probably time I drop the act as well."

The old ninja nodded. He'd learned quickly that when the blonde had come to the decision to become a ninja, her gender was not the only thing she wished to conceal.
"I'm gonna get stronger and prove to everybody that I can be a great ninja - believe it!" Those were the words she'd spoken to him all those years ago. And despite the facade she presented to everyone, Sarutobi knew she'd stuck by her word.

'Such an amazing child...'

Clenching a fist at her side, Naruto stared back at the Hokage monument. "I'm gonna be the greatest Hokage someday," she vowed. Her eyes fell on the image of the Fourth, her eyes narrowing in determination. However, she quickly looked away, grinning back at the two elder ninja. "Or else my name isn't Uzumaki Naru!" She laughed, turning on one foot and dashing away. "See ya later!"

Sarutobi watched until she vanished down the street, releasing a heavy sigh. He turned back to Iwano. "What do you think?" he asked.

"I told you once before and I stand by my word, Sarutobi," Iwano said with a serious expression on her face. "That girl is remarkable. To know the lengths she's gone to protect herself, the treatment she's endured.... and yet she wants to become Hokage despite all that." Her expression saddened. "Our village is full of fools!"

Sarutobi didn't speak, choosing instead to look up at the face of the Yondaime. Each time he gazed upon the rocky visage of his deceased successor, he felt a little bit older.

~ "This child... is the hero of our village..." ~ Intense blue eyes clouded in pain had stared down at the infant bundle in his arms. ~ "I'm depending on you, Sandaime-sama.."~

And despite all his efforts, he was still failing. They all were. "It was his dying wish to see her cherished, thanked for her sacrifice..." Sarutobi's eyes were pained. "He wanted her to live, to be happy, to become something great..."

"Naru...To grow..." Iwano murmured softly. "She has done that, Hokage-sama, I can tell.. far more than anyone thinks." The Hokage nodded in agreement. The two of them stood in silence a few moments before she tapped her cane against the road, breaking the silence. "Rest assured I will see to it that the Council does not block your decision." Sarutobi made a sound of surprise. "Have you forgotten the clout this old woman has, Sarutobi-sama! When Iwano Miyako asks, so shall it be done!"

He laughed out loud. "How could I have forgotten?" He then fixed her with a serious expression. "Are you certain though?"

"They certainly proved they were capable," Iwano said, nodding her head with a grin. "Make my words, Sarutobi-sama, Team 7 is going to get that mission!"

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Academy Instructor and Chunin ranked Umino Iruka was just finishing a stack of test papers when there was a sudden knock at the classroom door. Sensing no threat, he set down his correcting pen, calling out for the person to enter. His brown eyes widened only slightly at the sight of Hatake Kakashi striding easily into the room with a casual, 'Yo'. "Kakashi-san!" he said with a friendly smile. "What brings you here? Is there something I can help you with?"

Kakashi scratched his head absently. "Yes, there is, actually," he replied. "I had a... concern regarding one of your former students."
The brown haired chunin frowned and rose from his seat. "It's Naruto, isn't it?" he asked. "What did he do? Is he all right? He's not hurt is he?"

Kakashi waved a hand placatingly. "Calm down, Iruka," 'Geez, what a Mother Hen...' "Yes, it is Naruto..." A panicked expression fell across the other ninja's scarred face, but Kakashi was quickly to reassure him. "But there's no worry, *she* is just fine."

There was a quick stretch of silence before Iruka stepped away from his desk, striding towards the door and shutting it quickly. He remained silent a few moments more before turning to the silver haired ninja with a serious expression on his face. "How long ago did you find out?"

"A few hours ago, actually," Kakashi answered. He let out a light chuckle. "It came as quite the surprise."

Iruka frowned. "She waited this long...?" he murmured.

The Jounin closed his eye, tucking his hands into his pockets. "I don't think she planned to tell us at all," he said. "As a matter of fact, we found out by accident."

"Accident?" Iruka's frown held a touch of suspicion now. "Accident how?"

Definitely a mother hen... it was no wonder the blonde was so attached to the teacher. Who else was willing to devote so much attention to her? Kakashi found it was rather sad. However, he had no desire to invoke any over protective fraternal/paternal/maternal/whatever instincts the other man might possess. Chunin though he may be, rumor had it Umino could be quite fierce when he wanted to be. With this in mind, Kakashi decided he may as well get straight to the point.

"Iruka," he said, utilizing the no-nonsense tone ninja used when relaying information. Iruka dropped his frown and waited for him to continue. "When I spoke to Naruto, she claimed she'd never once lied about her gender. I thought it was strange that anyone could go so long hiding that information, but I see now that she had help. I went to check out her records, but it seems they don't exist."

Iruka shook his head. "They exist." he answered. "Hokage-sama told me that he had her records removed from public access not long after she was born." The Jounin frowned at this bit of information, but he imagined he knew why it had been done. "However, if you were to look at her birth certificate, it clearly states that she's a girl."

"Yet she pretended to be a boy..."

The chunin frowned sadly. "She was scared... Can you imagine what might have happened if people had known?"

He could, but he really didn't want to. Kakashi could hear the kinds of taunts villagers might come up with echoing through his head. None of them he wished to repeat.

"She didn't know why they treated her they way they did," Iruka went on. "But Naruto knew it was because of something they felt she was to blame for..." He remembered the look in her eyes that night, when Mizuki revealed the truth of what she was. How had it not broken her...? He closed his hand into a fist.

Kakashi studied the chunin before him before closing his eye with a sigh. "So, she let everyone
believe what they wanted." He let out a soft snort. "She even had me fooled."

A faint smile made its way across Iruka's face. "Everyone's always underestimated her," he said. "Why do you think she's known as the most Unpredictable Ninja?"

He had a point there... but that once again brought up the question Kakashi most wanted answered. "What else is she good at?"

The Chunin blinked at him, surprised at the question. The Jounin fought the urge to cringe. After all, the blonde had been under his command for several months already. By now, he should have had a concrete idea of where the genin's strengths and weaknesses lay. He'd thought he'd been certain during their first bell test. Naruto had charged him with reckless abandon at the beginning, but had showed creative thinking with the use of Kage Bunshin. However, she'd relied too heavily on the jutsu, allowing Kakashi to turn it against her...

Or had she?

In the rare moments Kakashi had taken to study her progress - he confessed he spent more time reading Icha Icha than monitoring his students - Naruto had shown an ability to find creative solutions to problems presented to her. Despite her size, she was strong - her hits possessed force behind them. And though she fumbled sometimes, her movements were quick. She thought on her feet, and did not hesitate to make quick decisions. Those traits alone made Naruto a good ninja just like Iwano-sama claimed. And yet, for the most part she behaved as if she hadn't a brain in her head! She was loud, brash, oftentimes completely clueless to what was going on around her.

'Or is that an act, too...? ' he wondered to himself.

~ "...there's more to being a ninja than just knowing how to observe others," ~ Iwano-sama had said. ~ "What you must also know... is how to act when you are being observed." ~

The blonde genin's words by the river sprung to his mind. ~ "You're the one who told me to 'see through deception', Kakashi-sensei!" ~ His eye widened. Was it actually possible...?

"What is it?" Iruka wondered, noting his expression.

"We ninja are trained to look 'underneath the underneath',' he murmured. Iruka studied him quietly. "And I've just come to realize that I've got a genin that I know next to nothing about."

The Academy teacher frowned once again. "You were given all of Naruto's Academy records when she was assigned to your team," he said, his tone guarded. "Shouldn't that tell you all you need to know?"

Kakashi looked up at him, chuckling once again. "Even if I had bothered to read it the first time around, you know as well as I do that anything written in Uzumaki Naruto's record is heavily biased, or in some cases entirely false."

Apparently that had been the answer the Chunin had wanted to hear, for his whole body seemed to relax, his expression lightening considerably. He raised his arm, scratching the back of his head absently. "Well then, what would you like to know?"

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An hour later Kakashi found himself in the one of the unused classrooms at the back of the
Academy, pouring over a multitude of papers and documents Iruka had produced for his perusal. He was impressed at the fact that all of them were quite thorough. He glanced up at the pony-tailed instructor. "Did you write all these?"

Iruka shook his head. "I enlisted the help of some other instructors - ones I knew would evaluate Naruto objectively. Granted, this file isn't included in her records, hence the status of Dead Last."

A title that she apparently did not deserve, according to these documents. Naruto was a great deal more talented than she was leading everyone to believe, but there was really no way to tell just how good she was - not by reading info from a file, at least. Kakashi frowned. "Still, this really doesn't tell me anything new... except maybe that a lot of teachers in the Academy need to be fired."

The expression on Iruka's face suggested that he agreed with his words, despite the added work and stress it would lay upon him and his fellow comrades. "Maybe," he said aloud. "But you should at least realize that Naruto doesn't deserve the title of 'Dead Last'!"

He'd already come to that conclusion himself, but he was not quite ready to admit to it out loud. Naruto may not have been the worst according to these records, but where did that put her in level of skill? "How's that?" he said instead.

Iruka sighed. "You might not know this, but Naruto was admitted into the Academy three years earlier than any of her classmates because she showed a proficiency for taijutsu."

Perhaps, but her style indicated most of what she knew was self-taught. She could do a lot a damage to an enemy with a style as unpredictable as hers, but it also put her at a disadvantage if she came across anyone with a stronger style. "But didn't she also fail the Genin Graduation Exam three times?" he asked.

The Chunin frowned. "That was deliberate."

That was not the answer he had expected. Kakashi's visible eye blinked in surprise. "What?"

Iruka merely sighed, remembering...

oo Flashback oo

The young Academy teacher ventured into the classroom, pausing at the sight of the small blonde struggling to right lines across the chalkboard at the back of the class. He let out a sigh, drawing big blue eyes to his face. "You haven't finished yet, Naruto?" he asked. "All your classmates have left for the day."

The blonde set her face into a petulant frown. "Big deal. I got all the time in the world, Sensei!" She hmphed and went back to her task, tiny hands stretching across the dark surface, writing the words "Chalk is a writing tool, not a projectile." Granted, projectile was spelled incorrectly, but Iruka hadn't the heart to point it out just now. The poor kid looked downtrodden enough as it was.

Of course, he wouldn't be a proper teacher if he didn't emphasize the benefits of pursuing knowledge. "You know," he said instead. "If you've got so much free time, you should be studying 'Kawarimi' and 'Henge' techniques. They're going to be on next week's test."

"Aw, I know those already," the blonde huffed, dusting the chalk from her fingers. "When're we gonna get to the fun jutsu, like Suiryuudan?"

Iruka blinked in surprise. "Where on earth did you hear about something like that?"
The blonde blinked, looking as if she'd said too much. She glanced down at her feet guiltily. "I read about it..." she murmured.

"You... read...?"

"I like to read!" she responded indignantly at his disbelieving tone. His surprise only increased. "About jutsu mostly... but I like reading 'bout other stuff, too..."

The chunin was still speechless.

She glanced up him, hurt shining in her blue depths. "Ya don't believe me, Sensei?" Before he could recover, a sneaky grin flashed across her face as she brought her hands together in a not commonly used seal. "Henge! OIROKE NO JUTSU!" There was a poof a smoke and the small child vanished, replaced by a buxom blonde wearing nothing but strategically placed wisps of smoke.

The blood drained out of Iruka's face almost instantaneously.

The naked woman grinned cheekily before 'poofing' back into the young blonde. "See, Sensei?" she crowed. "I can do a Henge just fi--"

Iruka cuffed her over the back of the head with one hand, holding a handkerchief to his bleeding nose with the other. "I warned you about that prank juts-- eh?" He glanced down a the blond only to find a practice log in her place. "What?"

"Gotcha!" Naruto was now seated on top of his desk, looking very much like the cat that got the canary. "How d'ya like that, Sensei?"

The chunin stared at her in confusion. She'd done so terribly during practice... "You... how...?"

Blue eyes stared at him knowingly. "I told you, Sensei," she said. "I know the jutsu."

He shook his to force away the stupor. "I don't understand! You've taken the Genin Exam twice now - you could have passed easily!"

The blonde shook her head. "Not yet, Sensei," she said quietly. "I gotta get stronger." Iruka looked confused once more. "I need to learn lots more if I'm ever gonna make it as a ninja. If I don't, I'll never pass the Exam."

Iruka was stunned at the wisdom of her words. 'She's right...' he thought to himself. 'The stronger she proves herself to be, the harder the committee will try to fail her.' "Seeing the realization in his eyes, Naruto gave him her patented fox grin. "You get it, Sensei?" If she was grinning, why was it she looked so upset? "That's my plan. I'm sorry, but you're just gonna be stuck with me for a little while lon--"

Iruka cut off the rest of her sentence, closing his arms around her in a tight hug.

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Kakashi rubbed a hand through his hair as his mind processed all the information he'd been given.

"So..." Iruka murmured.

The Jounin turned to him. "Naruto trusts you," he said. "Since you know him better than anyone, what can you tell me about his--" 'Damn...!' "Her overall skill as a ninja."
Iruka paused, looking thoughtful. "Well, one thing I can say for absolute certain," he began. "Is her chakra control absolutely sucks."

Kakashi nearly fell over.

The Chunin continued, "Though that's hardly her fault... No one's been able to show her how to harness her 'unique' chakra properly." He looked down. "I'm only an Academy teacher... I'm not equipped to handle her... circumstances."

He nodded in understanding. "You've done your best, Iruka," he said. "And I'm certain Naruto's grateful for all that you've done for her." At his words, the teacher flushed in embarrassment. "But now I suppose I know what my next move is..."

"And that is...?"

Kakashi closed his eye in a crescent grin. "It's time I got to know my REAL subordinate."

'Good luck,' Iruka wanted to say, but held his tongue. The Jounin would soon figure out that that would be much harder than he expected. Instead, he began collecting the papers spread out over the desk, returning them to their unlabeled folder. "If that's the case, there's one thing you should know," Kakashi glanced up at him. Iruka smiled. "Her real name is Naru."

Kakashi nodded before vanishing in a poof of smoke.

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Elsewhere, a blonde genin let out a loud sneeze. Perhaps putting the damp jacket back on hadn't been a good ideal after all. She shrugged.

"Ah well... Now, back to that ramen!"

End Chapter 3
Chapter 4: Let's go to Wave Country

Chapter Summary

A mission to Wave Country turns out to be a little more complex than Team 7 expected.

"BASTARD!!"

The Uchiha easily avoided the punch aimed for his head, nimbly maneuvering himself out of harm's way. Tensing his legs, he sprang forward with a strike of his own directed towards the blonde in front of him. He could tell that retaliation hadn't been expected so quickly, as the orange clad genin jumped and stumbled away, narrowly avoiding the blow.

Blue eyes glared at him, the unspoken 'what the hell?!' broadcast on her face loud and clear. However, Sasuke wasted no time with explanations. Readjusting his footing in preparation, he rushed forward again to deliver another strike. This time the blonde was prepared; she dropped into a crouch, preparing to slip in beneath his guard. Not about to fall for such a simple move, Sasuke bent backwards, catching her arm as she lunged at him. Pulling hard, he swung her body away, holding back a smirk as she rolled across the grass.

Naruto recovered from the toss quickly, hopping to her feet with a snarl. "You think that's funny?" she snapped. "Where do you get off throwing me like that?"

He snorted. "You're so small it's pretty easy to do," he remarked. "I didn't even have to use any chakra."

That got her. She reached into her weapons pouch, hurling a handful of shuriken in his direction. He blinked, drawing out one of his own kunai to parry them off. Once the sharp projectiles were out of the way, he brought his arm back, throwing his kunai at her. He'd expected her to narrowly duck, squeal, and then curse him out as she usually did following any of his attacks. However, this time her reaction was completely different. She caught the speeding dagger out of the air, twirling it expertly on her fingers before tossing it into a nearby tree with a neat 'thunk!'

Sasuke's dark eyes widened momentarily in surprise. 'What the hell...? She's never done that before...' Pushing the thought aside, he rushed towards her again, launching into a series of volley of kicks. Naruto managed to block a majority of them but Sasuke had a few inches on her in terms of height, giving him farther reach to work with than the diminutive blonde. After a few volleys, a well placed kick had the blonde falling back once more. However, this time she remained seated in the grass, wheezing slightly. Instead of continuing his own attack - this was only a simple spar, after all - Sasuke kept his distance, struggling to catch his own breath.

On the outside, he maintained his mask of disinterest, but in reality his thoughts were a different story. This time had been different - he'd never had to put so much effort into downing the moron before. His mind replayed certain aspects of their fight. Naruto had always been a quick and heavy hitter, but there'd never been any real planning behind her attacks before. She'd just swing a punch and hope it hit. However, this time around she'd been crafty - attempting to use her size to her advantage. And the trick with the kunai? What the hell was that about...?
Feeling a second wind, he glanced down at the blonde with a slight smirk. "Is that the best you can do, moron?"

As he predicted, the blonde tensed and fixed him with a sharp scowl. "Shut up, bastard."

It was strange... something was different, and it wasn't just her method of fighting. Ever since their escapade with 'Tora-kun', the blonde had been decidedly subdued. Of course, that wasn't to say he didn't still find her horribly obnoxious, but Sasuke found sometimes that the blonde would be in the middle of her usual antics and then would stop, thinking better of it. It was if the whole 'Clumsy Idiot' thing was a routine that she'd come up with to keep everyone in the dark about what she really was.

'That's ridiculous,' he thought. 'Naruto doesn't have the brains to pull off something like that...'

How could someone go years making everyone believe they were one thing when they were really another? 'Well... there's that stupid orange jacket...' He glanced at said article of clothing, fighting hard not to cringe in distaste. No self respecting ninja would ever be caught dead in such a garish thing, but for the last two or three years, Naruto had worn that jacket - hot or cold. The bulky material had concealed most of her form - and that coupled with her boisterous voice, strange mannerisms, and horrible social skills, no one would have ever thought to think twice.

Though her secret was out, the number one rookie of their class couldn't help but think that wasn't the only thing she was hiding. There was only one way to find out for sure, however...

He folded his arms across his chest, letting out a bored 'hn'. "I should've known," he muttered. "You were talk all along. Just a little girl pretending to be a ninja."

The blonde let out a growl as she jumped to her feet, her eyes light in anger. "You wanna see what a little girl can do?" she snarled. "FINE!" With that she rushed at him quickly, pulling her fist back to strike.

Totally predictable... Sasuke moved forward in anticipation, prepared to duck under her swing once she came closer. However, as she sped towards him, she touched down on the ground with one foot, pushing her body to the side. He blinked, stunned at her sudden deviation. Taking advantage of his surprise, she twisted her body so that she was behind him. Before he could even figure out what had happened, Sasuke was face down in the dirt.

'What...?!'

"Ha! How d'ya like that, Sasuke-bastard!" Naruto crowed, a victorious smirk on her face.

Sasuke was too stunned to reply.

From her spot on the sidelines, Sakura suffered from similar feelings of disbelief. She'd watched the whole fight from start to finish - keen green eyes taking in all of Naruto's unexpected moves. Yet, for all of her intellect, the kunoichi was still unable to wrap her mind around any of it.

'Naruto... beat Sasuke-kun...' Granted, she'd won only because she'd caught the Uchiha off guard - at least that's what part of her brain kept telling her - but the idea itself was still too much to comprehend. Naruto, the Dead Last, had beaten their class' Number One Rookie.

The fangirl in her railed at the injustice of it, but another part of Sakura - perhaps Inner Sakura - was deeply impressed. It was quite the shock to discover that Naruto kept such a vital piece of information about herself a secret - granted, Sakura was still waiting for that knowledge to really sink in - but she just couldn't stand the thought of a goofball like that being representative of the
minority that was kunoichi. Fortunately, from what she'd witnessed today, it appeared that the blonde was capable of utilizing that squishy mass between her ears, rather than jumping and swing her arms around like a monkey.

Naruto had fought well.

Naruto had fought smart.

As a result, Naruto had won.

"I don't understand..." she muttered to herself. "How'd she do it...? How'd she get good...?" She remembered Naruto's scores, his--- er, her poor performances back during their days in the Academy. She'd been fast, and strong it was true, but she hadn't stood a chance against her other classmates. Sakura frowned thoughtfully. She'd always thought it odd that the blonde couldn't create a simple shadow clone to save her life, but could summon up a platoon of Kage Bunshin without blinking an eye. How was that? Was it possible for someone like her improve so quickly? Or had she truly been that skilled all along. If that were true, why the secrecy? "I just don't understand..."

Kakashi, who had witnessed the majority of the spar from the cover of the trees, chose that time to jump down and reveal himself. After all, they did have business to attend to. "Well," he replied, coming up behind a still awe-struck Sakura. "That was certainly interesting, wasn't it?"

Still troubled by her own thoughts, the kunoichi barely noticed his presence. "You're late, Sensei..." she muttered absently, watching as her two teammates engaged each other once again. No doubt Sasuke was trying to figure out whether that last fight had been a one time thing. From how this one was going, that didn't seem to be the case. "Is this... really Naruto?" Kakashi glanced at her. "I feel like I don't even know hi--her!"

"You're not the only one..." "Well," he drawled. "There's an easy way to fix that." He turned his eye to the two combatting genin. "Sasuke, Naruto! Break it up!"

The two glanced up and stopped, making their way over to them. A fox grin was already affixed to Naruto's face as she reached them. "You're late, Kakashi-sensei!"

Kakashi fixed her with an eye grin. "We've already established that, Naruto," he said patiently. "In fact, Sakura and I here were just commenting on you and Sasuke's spar."

The Uchiha tensed and the blonde's grin only widened further.

"You totally saw me kick Sasuke's ass, ne?"

Owner of said ass let out a snarl.

Quick to come to her beloved's defense, Sakura rounded in on the blonde. "No way, Naruto!" she exclaimed. "Sasuke-kun was holding back!" *THERE'S NO WAY HE'D LOSE TO A MIDGET CROSS-DRESSER! SHAAAAAA!* Inner Sakura chorused.

Kakashi's eye was thoughtful. "This is true..." His mind replayed the fight scene by scene. "But so was Naruto."

Both Sasuke and Sakura started in surprise. "What?!"
He expected Naruto to add her own two cents, colorfully retelling the fight, but she remained silent. Well, there was no sense in beating around the bush....

"It seems that there's quite a bit we don't know about you, Naruto... especially given recent developments..." the Jounin said. Nothing like near-death experiences to reveal certain truths, right? "Wouldn't you agree that it's time you gave a proper introduction?"

Her posture and expression suggested that she didn't, but realizing all eyes were on her she let out a deep sigh, relaxing her posture slightly. "Fine..." She paused, folding her arms across her chest with a grin. "The name's Uzumaki Naru... I don't like people who are cocky or rude." She gave her male teammate a pointed glare, which he easily returned. "I like training, reading," Her teammates' expressions showed their disbelief. "And learning new jutsu." She paused, looking thoughtful. "I also like plants and cooking, but I mostly eat ramen 'cuz it's quick and really, really good. I was telling the truth when I said I didn't like the 3 minutes it takes for instant ramen to finish -- 3 minutes is waaay too long! -- but I love eating at Ichiraku's..."

'Of course...' Sasuke and Sakura thought.

Naruto's grin widened and her eyes glinted sharply. "And I *am* gonna be the greatest Hokage ever - you better believe it!"

Kakashi chuckled quietly. It was comforting to know that much of her likes and dislikes stayed the same. Perhaps she wasn't that much different after all.

However, Sakura wasn't as assured. "I still don't understand," she frowned, studying Naruto's profile. "Why did you pretend that you were a boy?"

Naruto's grin fell away, replaced by a guarded frown. "I didn't pretend," she muttered, looking away. "I just let people believe that they wanted."

"Wha...." That was preposterous... "It didn't ever occur to you that you could get in trouble for that?" Sakura's frown turned disapproving. "It's bad enough that you pull pranks all the time - but this..."

That frown... it was same look that she got from everyone else... Naruto's eyes darkened. "It wasn't a prank!" she snapped. "You don't get it at all!"

Startled, the pink haired kunoichi took a step back. When had Naruto ever yelled at her before? A quick glance at Sasuke revealed him to look just as surprised as she.

'Ah... this is getting out of hand...' "Now, now," Kakashi replied, stepping forward once more. "We're getting off track... I just wanted to get clear the air," 'And get a better idea of what I'm dealing with...' "before we took on our next assignment."

The blonde's mood changed almost instantaneously. "We've got a new mission?" She began bouncing up and down gleefully at the sight of the mission scroll in the Jounin's hand.

"It's a step up from the norm... It's a C rank." Kakashi paused to study their expressions, each ranging from excited, to slightly interested, to vaguely worried. "It's another escort mission -- our client's name is Tazuna and we're to escort him back to his home in Nami no Kuni."

Sakura's eyes widened. 'Wave Country... ?'

Sasuke smirked. "I take it he's worried about bandits, too, right?"
Kakashi nodded. "You three think you're ready for this?" he asked. "I can always turn it down---"

"Hell no, Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto exclaimed, her earlier dark mood a thing of the past. "We're Team 7 - we were born ready!"

Her male teammate studied her a brief moment before nodding his head slightly. "What the moron said."

After a few moments, Sakura nodded as well, her eyes filling with determination. "That's right, we're ready!"

Satisfied, Kakashi nodded. 'Let's hope so...' 

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Flanked by his armed entourage, the old tycoon strode into the dark room, tossing a manila folder down in front of occupants seated at the table in the corner. He watched as a slim hand reached out, opening the folder to peer at the contents inside. The owner of the hand drew out a photograph, holding it out for the others to see.

"That the guy?" asked one.

"He's old." said another.

"He'll have guards..." said the holder of the photograph. "But I doubt he can afford more than a Chunin or two."

"It'll be a cinch."

The tycoon smirked, turning away. "Just make sure it gets done." He exited the room, his thugs trailing behind.

"Get to it," said a fourth figure sitting in between the others. He was a large man with his face partially concealed by bandages. "Otherwise we don't get paid."

Two of the figures nodded, and bowed, "Right!" They quickly vanished from sight, leaving the large man and the figure holding the photograph.

He smirked down at the photo, memorizing the face of the gruff looking old man staring back at him. "Sorry, old man," he said, drawing a kunai from a pouch at his side. He took the photograph and placed it down on the table, holding his kunai over it. "But you're as good as---"

oooo

"Dead! Aarrrrghhh! Just wait'll I get my hands on you!"

Kakashi grabbed the collar of Naruto's jacket, keeping her from carrying out her thoughts of violence against the old drunk currently in their company. If only she'd connected with him like she had with Iwano-sama. Though to be fair, he certainly wasn't making it easy. The blonde still struggled against his hold. "Easy, Naruto..." he cautioned. "You can't expect to succeed in this mission if you maul the client!"

Thankfully, she ceased her struggle, but her face still told of her displeasure for their situation.

Sakura gave the blonde an exasperated sigh. "Honestly, Naruto... try to show a little restraint...!" she scolded. Deep down however she shared in the blonde's anger. *RESTRAINT, MY ASS!*
Inner Sakura raged. *THAT OLD LUSH LIED TO US! POUND HIM INTO THE GROUND -- SHAAA!*

Their current mission was not going at all like they had expected. That was of course, no thanks to their client, Tazuna, a bridge builder who had hired. Though he had hired them on for protection, he had neglected to mention that it was not bandits he sought protection from, but OTHER NINJA. The team soon learned that said ninja had been hired by the infamous Gatou of Gatou Corp who wished to halt the production of a bridge connecting Tazuna's village to the mainland.

The old builder hadn't meant any harm - he and his compatriots were too impoverished to afford an A or B rank, which the mission *should* have been assigned. They were certainly sympathetic to his plight - not that that made being attacked by Mizugakure nukenin any easier to take in stride.

Kakashi did not appreciate the deception and had told Tazuna so. The old man was genuinely repentant - even if he did lay a bit of a guilt trip on them. Widowed daughter and grandchild... sheesh... Kakashi supposed he'd had no other choice though. Nor did they really - the mission had to continue or else he was as good as dead.

...Sigh...

Once he was certain she would do the old man no harm, Kakashi released his hold on Naruto's jacket. The girl did not retaliate, instead she ran her hands through her messy locks in frustration. "Arrgghhh!" Her teammates fixed her with a 'what's *your* problem?' look. "I get that we're going on with the mission so that the old dude doesn't bite the big one, but that doesn't mean I hafta like that he lied to us!"

The old man took a drag from his hip flask, fixing the blonde with a scowl. "Look, I already told ya my reasons," he grunted. "B'sides... you're one to talk ya little punk." Naruto blinked at him. "There's no way you're old enough to be a ninja -- to think I'm trustin' my life to a midget like you!"

Naruto's eyes spoke of murder as this time Sakura struggled to keep her back.

The Jounin sighed once again. "I trust we're close to your village, Tazuna-san?" he asked. The old man drew his eyes from the blonde - did he enjoy antagonizing her? - nodding seriously. "We'll need to stay on our guard in case those ninja who came after us before have reinforcements."

At that, Sasuke frowned darkly, his mind recounting the brief skirmish they had undertaken with the nukenin. Naruto had sensed their presence first - though whether she'd done it intentionally was uncertain. At the sight of two chunin-level closing in on her so suddenly, the blonde had frozen. Sasuke wasn't sure it had been out of fear however; it was almost as if she'd been expecting one thing, but then realizing the situation was different quickly reacted.

Whatever her reasons, she'd allowed the Uchiha an opportunity to subdue one of the ninja, while she engaged the other. The nukenin's clawed gauntlet had nicked her hand, cutting loose the wrappings she usually bound her hands with. Of course, she had grumbled about this as she rewrapped them after the fact, never really minding the fact she could have been incapacitated by the poison dripping from the blades had she been any closer. It was surreal, but it only confirmed what Sasuke had been wondering for days...

Naruto was more skilled than she let on.

The thought made him angry. How dare she hide her abilities? He was the only one supposed to have any talent. She was supposed to be the Dead last, the moron! 'Pretending to be a boy is one thing...' he thought, glaring daggers into her back. She was too busy yelling at Tazuna to notice.
'How much skill is she hiding?' He briefly remembered their last sparring session, and the fact that she'd managed to knock him down. 'She can't possibly be better than me...' His eyes darkened. 'No... that's impossible!' Sakura watched Sasuke worriedly, taking in the emotions flashing across his usually blank face. 'This is all so strange...' she murmured, following his gaze to the blonde. 'We've been walking for hours now and Sasuke has yet to stop staring at Naruto...' Her frown deepened. 'And he hasn't said a word since the fight...' He'd made a comment about Naruto freezing up, and the blonde had quite calmly told him that she would never back down from a fight. Whether it had been a challenge or a not so subtle 'kiss my ass', the Uchiha hadn't spoken a word since. 'I wonder if Sasuke-kun is interested in her now that he knows that she's a girl...' Her eyes widened in horror at the thought. *NARUTO?! NO WAY WE'RE GONNA STAND FOR THAT!* said Inner Sakura, rolling up her proverbial sleeves. *WE BEAT THAT INO-PIG AND WE'LL BEAT NARUTO-BAKA, TOO! BELIEVE THAT, SHAAA!*

'Naruto....' Both she and Sasuke thought, 'I will defeat you!' The blonde tensed, practically feeling the twin glares digging into her back. She glanced back at the murderous looks being sent her way before forcing her eyes quickly back to the front. 'Eh... what the heck did I do wrong now...?' Tazuna and Kakashi surveyed the silent exchange, slightly nonplussed. The old man spoke first, taking another hit from his flask. "Weird bunch a brats you got here, Hatake..."

Kakashi closed his eye in a resigned grin.

oooo

The small group made their way through forest, pausing at the sound of rushing water. Kakashi slowed to a stop, turning the others' attention to him. He gave Tazuna a questioning glance to which the old man responded with a nod. "All right, kiddies," he said with a grunt. "We're almost there now..."

Naruto paused, inclining her head. She could both hear and smell the river from where she stood. "Are we goin' the rest of the way by boat or somethin'?" she asked.

"Try not to fall in this time..." Sasuke smirked at her angry glare. "Idiot."

They walked through the trees, coming to a makeshift dock that resided at the water's edge. Tazuna scanned the area before turning back to the ninja in his company. "A boat should be here to pick us up any time now..."

Kakashi nodded, but before anyone could move he was drawing a kunai out of his side pouch. His genin looked at him in confusion. "That's going to have to wait," he said. His visible eye narrowed slightly. "It seems as if we have company..."

oooo

Sakura stared at Kakashi, her green eyes wide in concern. That concern lay with the fact that their sensei was currently facing down a dangerous zanbato-wielding nukenin by the name of Momochi Zabuza. According to him he was the one hired out by Gato to kill Tazuna-san. A Jounin-level ninja who had already come close to completing his goal with the use of a mere mizu-bunshin! They were so out of their league! She turned to her Sasuke-kun, hoping he could provide her some reassurance. However, she was brought up short by the caged look in his eyes. "Sa-sasuke-kun...?"
The two Jounin exchanged the usual introductory banter - as it turns out they each were infamous in each other's respective villages. However, the time for talk was over quickly, and without warning the two rushed each others, blade colliding with kunai with a loud clang.

Momochi Zabuza was a monster - huge, massive muscles and cold, dark eyes that bored right into you. A missing nin from Kirigakure, he was known as a demon; he'd been the only graduate of his Academy class due to the fact he'd slaughtered all the others. He'd sprung on them without warning, his sights set on wiping Tazuna - and quite possibly them as well - from the face of the earth. It was obvious that they had no chance against him.

But Kakashi, however... Kakashi had a Sharingan.

One singular Sharingan, concealed beneath his hitai-ate. Sasuke didn't know how he'd gotten it, but given the scar residing beneath it, he hadn't been born with it... Still, all that mattered was that he had one, while he, Sasuke, did not. He'd heard the moniker Copy Nin no Kakashi before, but it had never occurred to Sasuke to think that had been a result of a kekkei genkai. His family's kekkei genkai.

There was only one other he knew of that possessed mastery of the doujutsu, and the very thought of him brought a chill to his body and mind.

Zabuza made a move towards the three genin guarding their client, but Kakashi was quick to intercept him. Sasuke caught a quick flash of the spinning tomoe, and the killing intent directed at the sword-wielding nin. Though he wasn't the intended target, he could feel the effects all the same.

~ "Foolish little brother..." ~

His body lurched slightly, and he reached for a kunai from his pouch. He had to find some way - *any* way to keep those memories from resurfacing. He didn't want to be...

~ "...Weak..." ~

Kakashi had use of his family's prized doujutsu while he himself had no clue as to how to activate it within himself. Meanwhile, his teammate, a blonde who he had originally believed to be a buffoon, was improving quickly - though it was quite possible she had always been this good - by leaps and bounds. Soon he would not be able to keep up. He would be left behind.

~ "You are weak... Your hatred is not strong enough..." ~

'I am not strong enough...' His body was shaking terribly. He couldn't control himself. If he didn't do something - anything to regain control...

"Sasuke!"

A hand gently rested itself on his left shoulder, while another wrenched the kunai from his hand. The actions yanked his mind back to the present, his dark eyes falling on those of his two female companions.

Sakura's eyes showed relief. "Please..." she said softly. "Stay with us, Sasuke-kun...?"

He stared at her, unsure of how to explain himself.

"Have you forgotten?" Naruto's words were gruff but he could hear the underlining concern beneath them. "We're s'posed to be guardin' Tazuna-jiji! We can't do that with you spacin' out on
us!

That's right... he was the Number One Rookie... they couldn't succeed without him. Repeating this over and over in his mind, he schooled his face back into its usual from. "Shut up," he grunted. "I'm fine.

Naruto seemed to be satisfied with that and turned her blue eyes back to the fight raging in the distance. However, Sakura was still concerned. "We can't stay here," she said. "There's no telling whether Zabuza will try to come at us again."

Her reasoning was logical. Kakashi had ordered them to keep the bridge builder safe, not to battle some rogue ninja. "We need to get to Tazuna's boat." he said.

The old builder stared at them in alarm. How could three children be discussing things so rationally when their sensei was currently engaged in a battle to the death? "What about your Sensei?" he asked.

"The mission comes first," Sasuke replied. "Kakashi should be able to handle that guy without our interference."

Naruto glanced at him a moment before nodding in agreement. She grasped Tazuna's hand, leading him away. "Let's go, Jiji!"

From the distance, Zabuza sneered and placed his hands in a familiar handsign. "You're not getting away!"

Kakashi's Sharingan whirled in recognition. "Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura! Get out of there, now!"

The three genin tensed their bodies for any sign of attack, but they were still unprepared for the mizu bunshin that appeared in their midst, zanbatou swinging wildly out towards them.

The blade slid neatly through the small blonde and the old man without any resistance. Sakura screamed and Sasuke made a grab for her, pulling her out of the way.

"Naruto! Tazuna-san!"

The pair did not fall to the ground as they expected. Instead, they vanished with a loud, familiar 'pop'.

Not wasting any time with questions, Sasuke's hands flew through the signs, as he yelled out, "Katon: Gokakyuu no Jutsu!"

The water clone vanished from existance much like the mist from which the Zabuza hailed. The missing nin's eyes widened. "What?! Impossible!"

The Leaf Jounin knew an opening when he saw it. Kunai flew from his hands quicker than lightning, imbedding themselves in the missing nin's arms and back. The swordsman let out a strangled cry, turning to back to him with hatred in his eyes. "Damn you!"

Kakashi gave him a measuring look. "You underestimated the power of my students," he remarked. 'As did I...' He drew another kunai from his pouch. "That mistake's gonna prove to be fatal..."

Zabuza opened his mouth to retort, but his words turned into a strangled gurgle as he fell to the ground. A single senbon protruded from his neck.
Sasuke and Sakura stared in stunned silence. Where had that come from?

His eyes, both normal and Sharingan honed in on the lone figure resting on a low tree branch in the distance. "And you are...?"

"I mean you no harm," The figure bowed, face hidden behind a porcelain mask. "Kirigakure no ANBU... I'm here to claim nuke-nin Momochi Zabuza."

Sasuke studied the other ninja. 'A tracker...?'

Kakashi's thoughts ran along a similar vein. 'He's young... around these guys' age...'

The tracker ninja vanished from the tree tops in a whirlwind, reappearing beside Zabuza's body. "I apologize for any inconvenience this man has caused you. He will bother you no longer..."

"So he's dead...?" Sakura murmured. Part of her was relieved. 'But... where are Tazuna and Naruto...?'

The dark haired ninja beside her tensed as the tracker hefted Zabuza's body from the ground. "What are you doing...?" he asked.

"I must dispose of his body," the ninja answered. "It contains secrets that our village does not wished disclosed to outsiders." The ninja bowed once more. "Thank you for your assistance in this matter, but I must depart. Farewell..." Soon, both he and Zabuza were gone in a swirl of leaves.

Kakashi sighed.

Sakura glanced back at him. "Are you all right, Sensei?" she asked worriedly.

"Just fine," he said. He glanced around the area. "Where are Naruto and Tazuna?"

A rustling from a nearby tree put everyone on their guard, but their worries were put to rest when Naruto jumped down with Tazuna on her back. "Here we are, Kakashi-sensei!" she crowed.


Naruto blinked at him in surprise, blushing at the unexpected praise.

Out of peril, the group continued the rest of the way to the dock where another man awaited them in a small motorboat. Seeing them in the distance, relief was evident on his face as he waved to them in greeting.

"You made it," Tazuna said.

"So did you," the man replied, making room for the bridge builder to step aboard.

"I wouldn't have," he said, gratitude showing in his eyes as he looked back at the Leaf ninja. "Were it not for these people."

Kakashi shook his head, pushing his hitai-ate back down into place. "We were just doing our jo--" He paused and groan, lurching forward slightly.

The three genin turned to him, bewildered, only to watch as he pitched forward. "Kakashi-sensei?!" Sakura cried out as she and Naruto halted his descent to the ground.

"Is he injured?" Tazuna called out.
Sasuke studied his prone form. "He's unconscious," he said. "He used up too much of his chakra..." 'From use of the Sharingan, I'd bet...'

"There's no use just standing around here," Naruto said, draping his arm over her smaller shoulders. Sakura absently echoed her action with his other arm. "Let's get 'im into the boat and get the hell outta here..."

"We'll take 'im back to our house," Tazuna replied. "You all look like you could use a good rest."

No one argued as they all filed into the boat and quickly pushed away from the dock.

Sakura stared at the unconscious form of their teacher, her eyes shining in worry. "I hope he'll be all right..."

Naruto gave him a reassuring grin. "No worries, Sakura-chan! This is Kakashi-sensei we're talkin' about! I'm sure he'll be just fine..."

Sasuke stared out at the vanishing shore, his eyes dark in consternation. 'He better be...' He thought, frowning. 'Because I get the feeling we haven't heard the last of this...'

End Chapter 4
Chapter 5: Friends

Chapter Summary

The mission to Wave brings about new faces, some of which aren't all that they seem to be...

Chapter 5

'...Well... It looks like I overdid it once again... Obito...'

Slowly clawing his way back to consciousness, Kakashi opened his eye, slowly scanning his surroundings. He was lying on a thick futon mattress in a moderately furnished room. Soft light filtered in through a nearby window and he could hear the faint sounds of water in the distance. Tazuna's home residence he surmised. So, his students had had the sense to leave the site of their battle. It was good to know his lesson of not abandoning teammates had gotten through to them.

'I seem to be doin' all right with them so far, right... Sensei...?'

Suddenly there was some movement at his left, and despite the effort it took, the exhausted Jounin turned his head to discern the source. A dark haired woman came into his field of vision, opening the curtains to let more light filter into the room. Was this the widowed daughter the bridge builder had spoken of before?

She glanced at him, her eyes widening at the sight of him gazing back at her. Her expression quickly morphed from surprise to relief. "Hatake-san, you're awake! Thank goodness!" Huh, must be the daughter then... "Your students were terribly worried about you - I'll let them know that you're up." Turning away, she quickly vanished out of his sight. Several moments passed before the silence of the room was broken by the sound of footsteps - the first two pair coming towards him much more quickly than the third.

"Kakashi-sensei!" His three genin appeared before him, varying degrees of relief written on their faces. Knowing they couldn't see it, he smiled slightly.

"We were really worried about you, Sensei!" Naruto confessed as she plopped down beside his futon, blue eyes studying his face for any signs of distress.

To be quite honest he still felt terrible - not that she would be able to tell just by looking at his eye - chakra exhaustion was no picnic.

"I'm fine," he answered. "I just used up too much chakra in that fight." Sensing the 'will you be all right' coming, he decided to beat them to the punch. "I'll be fine in a few days with some rest."

"A couple of days?" Naruto blinked.

"Of course," Sakura turned to her. "How long did you expect it to take?"

The blonde scratched her head. "I dunno... a good night's rest is usually all I need." Her teammates stared at her in disbelief. Well... Sakura stared whilst Sasuke glowered. "What?"
"N-nothing..." Sakura shut her mouth with an audible snap. *A GOOD NIGHT'S REST? ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!* Inner Sakura exclaimed. *NOBODY RECOVERS FROM CHAKRA EXHAUSTION THAT QUICKLY! YOU LIAR! SHAAA!*

Sasuke glanced away. *Hidden talent and stamina... just what are you...?* Feeling their teacher's eye fall upon him, he turned back with the usual frown on his face. "What's our next move?"

Kakashi blinked. "Hn?"

Sakura glanced in between the two of them before frowning slightly. "Sasuke-kun thinks that Zabuza guy might still be alive."

Sitting up slowly, Kakashi sighed. "He's probably right." The three genin tensed. "The ninja who took his body was no ANBU..." Considering the years he himself had spent in the Konoha's ANBU ranks he should have known better...

"Oh, right, I get it!" Sakura nodded in understanding. "Tracker ninja usually dispose of the target's body on site, ne? That boy took his body away..." Her green eyes darkened as the rest of the puzzle pieces slid into place in her mind. "Which means... he was an accomplice?"

"Most likely," Sasuke answered. "Which means once he helps Zabuza recover, they'll both be back to try again." He frowned, clenching his hands in his lap. "We couldn't do anything the first time around... We need to get stronger..." 'I need to get stronger... I can't be weak... I WON'T be left behind...!' He glanced up at Kakashi again. "Otherwise we won't stand a chance against him!"

"Or that other ninja if he decides to step in," Sakura added. "We don't even know what he's capable of."

Naruto snorted. "There's no use moping about it!" she exclaimed, rising to her feet. Determination shone in her eyes. "If we're gonna get stronger, we hafta train!" She turned to their sensei. "Right, Kakashi-sensei?"

He paused, studying the three of them. After a moment, he chuckled. "You know, Naruto.... you're absolutely right."

At the excited glint in his eye, Sakura, Naruto, and Sasuke all backed away nervously.

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The slightest movement sent pain racing through his nerves, but Zabuza ignored it. If that one-eyed freak thought for a minute he was finished... Slim hands tending to his injuries halted his inner tirade, and he glanced up at his subordinate in mild annoyance. "What is it?"

"I spoke to Gatou."

Zabuza snorted. No doubt the old geezer had heard about their little 'setback'. "And?"

There was a slight pause. "He was not pleased about the recent developments."

The bandaged ninja scoffed. "It doesn't matter," he replied. "Let him complain all he wants. Once the job is finished I plan to kill him anyway. He talks too much."

The fat, weak man - talking down to him as if he were his property... That was one of the reasons he'd left Kirigakure. A Hidden Village was suppose to be just that hidden; real ninja were not supposed to cow to the weak slobs who waved money in their faces. Ninja were supposed to be
fierce, strong, and ruthless! The old ways had been forgotten...

"And the job... would you have me finish it?"

He shook his head, grimacing at the pain the motion caused. "No, I'll handle it... me an' Kakashi have a score to settle, after all." His mind went back to his fight with the Sharingan wielder. Now that he knew his secret, taking care of him would be easy. Enjoyable, in fact. "I'll be leaving the brats to you... make sure they don't get in our way."

There was a long pause before his subordinate nodded. The dim light of the room glinted off of the stolen ANBU mask on his face. "As you wish, Zabuza-sama."

Kakashi surveyed the progress of his students with a critical eye. There wasn't a great deal he could teach them given his invalidity coupled with their time constraints. From what he'd seen from them so far, however, it appeared that they possessed the knowledge and instinct to properly take care of themselves and each other in the type of situation they were facing. What they lacked was the endurance. Bearing that in mind, he'd taken them all out into the forest and introduced them to the chakra building exercise of Tree Walking.

Naturally, Sakura caught onto it the quickest. Though she had the smallest reserves of the three, she also possessed the greatest amount of control over her chakra. That wasn't to say her teammates were doing too badly, however. The two of them had struggled at first but after a few hours they had slowly started to get the hang of it.

Watching the Avenger and the Prankster rushing up their respective trees in a competition of sorts, Kakashi couldn't help but feel a little bit of nostalgia. When he'd first taken on the three genin, he had seen characteristics in each of them that likened them to his own genin team. The Uchiha, the young prodigy focused only on becoming stronger was so much like a younger version of himself that Kakashi had to keep from groaning at the irony of it all. Of course, next was the kunoichi, brilliant in her own right, but too preoccupied with kissing the ground said Prodigy walked on to improve her own skills. If only she put her talents to use!

'Sakura... you're so much like Rin it's scary sometimes...'

And since every team was balanced to include the strongest and weakest, as Sasuke was to Kakashi, so was Naruto to Obito...

Or, at least she had been...

Obito hadn't been that bad of a student in the Academy... the only thing he'd really had going against him was the fact that he seemed to be the Anti-Uchiha. Most of his kin had carried themselves with that quiet sort of confidence that bordered on arrogance, saying without words, 'I am Uchiha, ergo I am better than you'. Obito was a black sheep; he was loud, brash, obnoxious, and lacking a Sharingan. His family had looked down on him because of these things, but he hadn't let that hold him down. Holding his head high, he'd been determined to prove himself no matter what it took...

'And you did just that... didn't you, Obito...?'

To most, Naruto was just the bumbler that the Uchiha had been, but it had all been an act. Kakashi didn't need the Sharingan to see that clearly now. Since the beginning of their trip, the blonde had been the recipient of numerous confused/angry stares as a result of her recent revelation. Despite...
the evidence, her teammates still couldn't wrap their minds around the fact that she'd been playing a role from day one. It didn't help matters that she sometimes slipped back into the role of 'the Fool', stating the obvious, or fumbling over some simple task. Kakashi knew she only did it to put her teammates' minds at ease, but he also knew it wouldn't help matters any. Teammates were supposed to be able to trust on one another and their skills in times of crisis - it wouldn't help anyone if they didn't know what to expect from her.

Kakashi supposed he could test her right now to just see the extent of her abilities. However, he found himself hesitating. He knew as well as she did that the more of herself that she revealed, the more questions there would be. Rules aside, the Jounin was just not prepared to explain to two 12 year olds that their teammate housed one of, if not the strongest of all Bijuu ever known to terrorize the lands.

His eye saddened slightly. 'What would you do, Obito?' His left eye had no answer for him.

"I did it, I did it! I made it to the top before you did, Sasuke-bastard!"

"We reached it at the same time, idiot."

Shifting his weight on the crutches Tsunami had been kind enough to lend him, Kakashi looked up from his book as the two genin touched down on the ground. They both panted slightly in exertion, but looked pleased at their success. "You guys caught on pretty fast," he commented. "I guess we better move on to the next exercise."

"Next exercise?"

"You didn't think that was all I had in store for you, did you?" He gave Naruto a measuring look. "You've still got a ways to go."

She knew exactly what he meant, but balked just for show anyway. "Whaaa...?! Why's that?"

Oblivious, Sakura turned a slanted look her way. "Because your chakra control still sucks..."

"Sakura-chaaaaann..."

"Now, now," Kakashi placated. "You did well... but you still waste a lot of chakra needlessly..."

Naruto's expression was one of genuine confusion now. "Huh? But I feel fine?"

"Oh really?" A quick glance over proved her words to be true. She was winded, but her reserves were barely depleted. How much of her chakra was hers, and how much belonged to her 'tenant', he wondered. "Well, in that case, you'll be taking the first shift with Tazuna at the bridge tomorrow morning."

As predicted, she shrieked in outrage. "That's not fair, Sensei!" She pointed a finger at her fellow kunoichi. "Make Sakura-chan go! She mastered the Tree Walking first, right?"

Kakashi leaned forward, meeting the blonde nose to nose. She eeped in surprise. "There's a reason I'm sending you first, Naruto," he said.

She blinked, apprehensive. "Why's that?"

"Because..." His expression turned positively devious. "I'm almost certain you'll be the fastest to recover for what I've got in store for you next!"
Naruto stared at him in disbelief. As his words sunk in, her face turned an interesting shade of blue. The birds in the trees overhead were startled from their perches by the loud cry that followed.

"WHAAAAT?!

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Tazuna's eye twitched as he surveyed the scene in front of him. "You kidding me...? THESE are my bodyguards? The same ninja who saved my life just days ago?"

Said ninja, excluding Kakashi, were laid out around the dining room in various states of exhaustion. The Jounin merely grinned; at least he'd had fun.

From her position half slouched against the dinner table, Sakura cast him a surly glare. "You go through everything we went through today and see how you like it!"

"Oh, that was nothing..." Kakashi drawled, turning a page in his book. Nothing, at least, compared to some of the things his colleague, Maito Gai, put his students through...

From their opposing sides of the table, Sasuke and Naruto twitched.

"Nothing?" Sakura stared at him in disbelief. "Are you serious? The tree walking was one thing, but to have us try water walking with weights on is another thing, Sensei!"

At least they'd learned that Naruto could swim, he thought to himself. It was just the whole being unconscious bit that had caused her trouble. "If you find you've got the energy to complain," he said mildly. "You'll be just fine."

Sakura shut up.

Tsunami tittered behind her hand. "I'm sure a nice warm meal will fix you all right up," she said. "You'll have your strength back in no time,"

"Not like it'll matter any..." All heads turned to the little boy in overalls hidden halfway behind the door. He glared at the ninja from beneath a floppy white hat. "You're wasting your time."

"Inari..." Tazuna grumbled half-heartedly.

Scowling slightly, Naruto sat up to meet the sullen boy's eyes. "What's that?"

Inari met her stare with a glare of his own. "You think a little training is gonna make a difference?" he spat, his expression one of disdain. "Gatou's not gonna be scared by the likes of you guys."

The blonde scoffed. "Like I'm afraid of some fat old businessman."

Tazuna frowned. "He may not be physically strong, but Gatou is a dangerous man," he said. "He's got this whole country in his pocket - everyone here is scared of 'im. They all know that anyone who tries to cross him gets made an example out of by his band of thugs. They don't show any mercy."

The smile vanished from Tsunami's face as her gaze suddenly found the floor.

Kakashi's eye lit up in understanding. 'So they've experienced his cruelty firsthand, have they?' He glanced at Inari. 'The boy's father, perhaps...?'
"That's why we must complete this bridge," Tazuna went on. "If we can just reach the mainland, our village will thrive and we can break free from his hold once and for all!"

Naruto nodded, planting her hands face down on the table as she pushed herself upwards. "Then that's just what we'll do!" She turned to the bridge builder, her eyes shining. "You're gonna get your bridge finished, Tazuna-jiji, believe it!"

Inari left the sanctuary of the doorway, striding up to the blonde angrily. "You don't know what you're talking about! Don't sit there and make promises you can't keep!"

Blue eyes turned on him, and he tensed slightly, but held his ground. "I don't make promises I can't keep," she said assuredly. "If I say we're gonna protect your granddad and finish his bridge then that's what we're gonna do!"

"Shut up! You don't know anything!" the smaller boy pushed at her slightly, but she didn't budge. "Why'd you come here? You don't know what it's like to live the way we do! You don't know what it's like to suffer, so don't come in here spouting that crap about how you're gonna save us---" The blonde's hand pushed his hat further down over of his head, halting the rest of his words.

"Naruto!" Sakura exclaimed.

She ignored her, staring quietly at the boy that stared back at her in indignant anger. "You talk too much, you know that?" she said quietly. Inari just continued to glare, tears welling up in the corners of his dark eyes. "I'm here cuz it's my mission. I may not know what it is Gatou's done to you and your family, but that doesn't mean for even a second that I don't know what it is to suffer." Something flickered in her eyes for a moment before she pushed it back down. "The difference between you an' me is I'm actually trying to do something about it while you're just sittin' on your ass feeling sorry for yourself." She turned away and headed towards the door, grabbing her shoes as she went. "Think about that before you go shooting off your mouth."

With a slam of the door she was gone, leaving everyone to stare after her.

The small boy stood in silence, willing himself not to cry in front of strangers.

It took a few seconds for Tsunami to realize the last couple minutes had actually occurred. "Oh my..." Like the maternal figure she was, she took a step towards the door.

"It's all right..." Kakashi said. The woman looked at him in surprise. "I'm sure Naruto'll be fine."

"What did Naruto mean though, Sensei?" Sakura asked. "About suffering?"

He paused. "Naruto's an orphan..." he answered after a few moments. "That kid's never known either parent, and has rarely ever been shown any real kindness."

The pink haired kunoichi gaped at him in surprise whilst her teammate only sat silently and listened.

Kakashi turned to the young boy, continuing. "So, Inari, I know that you have anger and you think that there isn't anyone who understands what you're going through... but I think Naruto might understand you better than you think. In a way... we all do, and that's why we're determined to help you and your village."

Tsunami came to stand behind her son, placing her hands on his shoulders. She smiled at Kakashi through teary eyes. "Thank you," she said earnestly. The Jounin merely nodded. "I suppose I should get back to dinner... I'm sure you're all starving by now..."
"Hm... I suppose we can't let Naruto go hungry can we...?" The Jounin reached for his crutches. Perhaps it was about time he had a talk with her anyway. "After all, she still has the first shift tomorrow."

Sasuke was already on his feet and heading towards the door. "I'll go get the moron..."

Sakura watched him go with a thoughtful frown on her face.

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It wasn't Inari's fault. Sure, he'd run his mouth a bit too much, but her anger had gotten the better of her. She'd been so caught up in setting the little brat straight that she'd let her mask slip just a little - she was certain her teammates had seen it.

'Oh well... they'll just have to get over it...' She sighed. In honesty, part of her was glad that her teammates knew. She was tired of having to play the happy-go-lucky Dobe all the time. It felt good not having to be loud and rowdy - not that it wasn't fun - all the time. Now she could focus more of her energy on improving herself.

Her feet led her to the trees where they had practiced their chakra exercises. As expected, her control over her own chakra reserves had been terrible. Still, she’d managed to catch on quickly, progressing up the tree just as quickly as her teammates. They’d been surprised by her success – well, actually… Sakura had been surprised, for some reason Sasuke had been furious – so she’d played the goofball routine to put their minds at ease.

It had worked, of course. They laughed at her antics and went back to their own practice, labeling her earlier progress a rare fluke. Their sensei, however, had looked at her with disappointment in his visible eye, before once turning back to his perverted book.

Even if she was unaware of the true meaning behind the look – in actuality, Kakashi didn’t like her playing the fool anymore than she did – it hurt seeing that look on his face. All her life she’d faced sneers and harsh glares from the people of the village. In their eyes she was nothing but a demon, a monster, a freak… It had been her hope that her genin team would be different; they’d see her skill and realize what an asset she was to their group. Perhaps it was not to be…

She sighed, placing her hand out flat against the tree’s trunk. ‘Even if they never acknowledge me,’ She stared at her hand, remembering her earlier words after their fight with the Mist Chunin. ‘I won’t back down… I won’t run away… I will walk a path of no regrets… ‘cuz that’s my Nindo…’

Unbeknownst to her, a figure lurked in the shadows, watching her with keen dark eyes. ‘It’s the little blonde from before…’ A senbon was drawn into the figure’s grasp as they stepped forward, preparing to strike…

The movement caught Naruto’s ears and she turned, squinting. “Who’s there?” Blue eyes peered into the darkness of the trees, taking in the sight of a young girl in a light pink yukata. Her heart shaped face was framed by long, black hair that hung low past her shoulders. Her eyes were a dark brown, holding a look that the blonde found to be very familiar.

The girl gave her a small smile. “It’s going to be dark soon…” She tilted her head in curiosity. “Should you be out here alone?”

Naruto shook her head and grinned. “I’m all right, I’m a ninja!” she assured, fingering her hitai-ate. The other girl studied the head guard before letting her eyes fall back on her face. “What about you though, Neesan?”
“I’m heading home myself,” the girl answered. Naruto nodded and grinned. The girl stared at her. “You shouldn’t do that, you know.”

Blue eyes blinked. “Do what?”

“Smile like that…” Naruto’s grin slipped from her face almost instantly. “It’s very painful to look at when one knows that it’s fake.”

The Leaf Genin puzzled over her words. She could see through her mask? “How can you tell?”

The girl smiled softly. “Your smile may be very open and carefree, but your eyes are so very sad,” She closed the distance between them slowly, keeping her eyes on Naruto’s face. “There is something that troubles you, isn’t there?” Naruto only blinked at her. “I know what it’s like to hide behind a mask, you see.”

As understanding dawned on the blonde’s face, inside the brunette frowned slightly. ‘What possessed me to say that…?’ she wondered.

“Is it always like this…?” She turned her attention back to Naruto. The blonde laughed ruefully. “I guess it doesn’t matter really… I need to focus on my mission, after all.” Nodded decidedly, she clenched her fists in determination. “I’ll show everyone, and then I’ll finally be able to show people that I have what it takes!”

The brunette stared at her curiously. “For what…?”

“To become the Greatest Hokage, of course!” Naruto grinned. “That’s my dream!”

“I see…” Dark brown eyes stared at the ground. “And this dream of yours… why do you pursue it? For recognition? Glory?”

“No…” She blinked and then shook her head deliberately. She thought of Sandaime-jiji, Iruka-sensei, and Iwano-obaasan. The words she had repeated to them echoed in her mind. “I want to protect the people precious to me.”

“The people… precious to you…?”

She thought of all the people in her life that had acknowledged her. She turned to the girl, her blue eyes bright and curious. “Do you have anyone like that?”

The girl paused in surprise and then smiled. “Yes… yes, I do.” She glanced back into the forest from whence she came. “I need to get back to them,”

She had to get back as well. Naruto’s face fell slightly; she really wasn’t looking forward to the questions that were sure to come. If only she could just stay here… She shook her head and smiled at the girl. “Hey, will I see you again?” The girl blinked again, causing her to flush slightly. “Well, you see… you were right about what you said about me being sad before…” She paused and ran a hand through her hair. “But for some reason, talking with you made me feel a little better.”

Smiling, the girl replied, “I’m glad.”

flushing more, Naruto turned away, shuffling her feet. What was with her acting so goofy all of a sudden? She was supposed to be a super-cool ninja! ‘You never see Sasuke acting like this!’

“Um… well, I better get going, too…” Turning back to the girl, she gave a quick bow before bounding off. “Bye!”
The girl watched her retreating back, the smile slowly melting from her face. They were similar in many ways – she could sense it just by looking at her. It was unfair that they had to meet under such circumstances, but there was nothing she could do. ‘Yes, we will be meeting again…’ she thought, fingering the senbon once again in her hand. ‘And for that, I am sorry…’

Naruto bounded back towards Tazuna’s house, struggling to rid her cheeks of their suspiciously pink tint. She’d never reacted in such a way while talking with Sakura-chan before! What was the big deal? Before she could ponder this thought in further depth, she slammed into something warm and solid, causing her to stumble backwards.

“Arrghh! What the hell?!” She glanced upwards, finding familiar dark eyes glaring back at her. “What do you think you’re doing, bastard?”

Sasuke gave her a once over, a scowl forming over his face. “You’re the one that ran into me, idiot!”

“Yeah right!” Rising to her feet, she looked away huffily. “What’re you doing here anyway?”

“Somebody had to drag you back to the house.”

“I don’t hafta be dragged anywhere! I was on my way back!”

“Hn.” He turned away, heading back the way he’d come. “Let’s go.”

Staring at his back a few seconds, Naruto made a face, sticking out her tongue with a loud, “Nyaaaa!”

With his back facing her, she missed the small smirk that formed on his face.

~ “I may not know what it is Gatou's done to you and your family, but that doesn't mean for even a second that I don't know what it is to suffer.” ~

Though the blonde had returned to the house with Sasuke as if she hadn’t stomped out before, Sakura couldn’t help but replay her words over and over in her mind. Because she was all jokes and smiles a majority of the time, it was unsettling to think that Naruto had ever experienced unhappiness that had nothing to do with a lack of Ramen.

Of course, somewhere in the back of her mind the pink-haired kunoichi had known that her hyperactive teammate lacked parents. She knew many of the adults in the village were distrustful of the blonde – though she still didn’t know why. She'd seen the hateful looks and whispered insults; it wasn’t as people were being particularly subtle about it. However, she’d taken Naruto’s boisterous behavior as a sign that the blonde just didn’t seem to care.

‘But she does…’ She’d seem a glimpse of bitterness in her blue eyes before she stormed out of the house. Sakura hadn’t even realized that she’d been capable of such an emotion. ‘Then again… there’s a lot we don’t know about her…’

Naruto was a girl. Yet she’d followed her around all the time in the Academy like a love-sick puppy. Did that mean she was attracted to her…? Her face flushed red at the thought. ‘No way…!!!’
Unfortunately Sakura had been several feet in the air while coming to this particular revelation, hanging upside down from a tree branch. With the lapse in concentration, the chakra holding her feet to the bark vanished, allowing gravity to pull her towards the ground below with a shriek.

A hand clamped around her ankle, halting her decent. “Pay more attention to what you’re doing.”

Sakura looked up (er… down) at her savior, her eyes wide with relief. “Sa-Sasuke-kun…!”

He didn’t meet her eyes as he pulled her up. “I don’t feel like having to carry you back to the house…”

She flushed, nodding her head in embarrassment. She was supposed to be focusing on her training, not worrying about Naruto! But still…! “I’m sorry… I was just thinking about last night…”

He glanced at her briefly. “Hn,”

“I don’t know what it’s like…” she admitted. “Even though I don’t get to see them often… my parents are alive…” She remembered complaining to him about her mother getting on her case, only to face his sharp reprimand. “I can’t even relate…” She was so different from them, she realized.

~ "It wasn't a prank!" ~ Naruto had snapped at her when she tried to chastise her about her secret. Naruto never snapped at her. ~ "You don't get it at all!" ~

“We wouldn’t want you to,”

The Uchiha was seated on the branch now, staring down at the forest floor. Was he thinking about his family? Or about Naruto? Why was it he was so focused on her, Sakura wondered. Was it because of her skill?

Hesitantly, she lowered herself down beside him. He didn’t object. “I know…” she said after a long moment. “Thank you for helping me.”

She thought of Naruto once again, now at the building site with Tazuna. She’d shown so much progress with their training while Sakura herself felt like she was being left behind. “I know I’m probably such a burden…” She stared at the ground.

Sasuke snorted. “It doesn’t matter,” he answered. “You’re my teammate. I’m supposed to look after you.”

She blushed, trying not to squeal in delight. Instead, she nodded in agreement. “Teammates look after each other,” she said. Glancing at him through thick bangs, she said softly. “If it’s not too much a bother,” Sasuke glanced at her and her blush deepened. “You can let me look after you, too…” His eyes widened slightly. “I know I’m not as strong as you guys, though, I know… but I figured I’d just let you know, because, you know… we’re teammates, like you said…”

Well, that had certainly been eloquent. At least she had managed to leave out any declarations of undying love and affection. *YOU’RE NO FUN AT ALL!* Inner Sakura said huffily.

He stared at her a few moments before looking away again. “Hn… do whatever you want.” He rose to his feet. “It’s almost time for our shift at the bridge.” In a flash, he jumped down from the branch, touching nimbly on the ground.

“Right,” Sakura jumped down after him, missing the rosy tint that graced his cheeks.
Both of them were oblivious to the pleased look on Kakashi’s face.

From her perch on a large stack of dried cement sacks, Naruto surveyed the construction with a bored expression, fighting back a loud yawn. She knew how important the building of this bridge was to Nami no Kuni. The detail gone into its construction was intriguing to Naruto, even if a lot of it she didn’t understand. Still, guard detail in itself was so lame! She could have had more fun training!

Tazuna gave her an annoyed glare. “You better not be fallin’ asleep on me, brat,” he warned. “I’ll tell your Sensei.”

The blonde jumped up, fixing him a glare of her own. “Yeah right, Jiji, I’ll have you know I’m 100% alert! Nothin’s gonna get past me!” To prove her point, she hopped up on top of the cement stack with a vigilant pose, searching back and forth for any potential threats.

The old man laughed at her antics until one of his workers approached him with a drawn expression on his face. He frowned, “Something wrong?”

The man sighed heavily, refusing to meet his eye. “Tazuna…” he said slowly, clenching his hands at his sides. “I can’t stay on anymore… I’m quitting the job!”

“Wha…? You can’t!”

Naruto watched the exchange silently.

“I’m sorry, but it’s too dangerous,” The other man looked away. “I got my family to think of…” He paused, finally meeting his eyes beseechingly. “You understand… right?”

“Yeah, yeah…” Tazuna grunted, staring off into the distance. “Get out of here…”

“Tazuna…”

“Just go.” The man relented, walking away leaving a frustrated Tazuna behind. He clenched his hands tightly, cursing under his breath. “If this keeps up…”

“You’re not giving up, too, are you…?” He glanced back at the blonde, pausing at the stern expression on her whiskered face. Idly he wondered where the marks came from before pushing the thought away.

“Hell no! I’m gonna finish this bridge even if I hafta do it with my own two hands!”

“That’s what I thought.” She stood up, grinning. “Well, rest assured, Jiji, you’ve got my help!”

Bringing her hands into the familiar cross seal, suddenly they were surrounded by several dozen clones.

“And ours, too!” they chorused.

Tazuna could only stare in awe.

“So,” Naruto fox-grinned. “Where do we start?”

“Waaaaghhh! Sakura-chaaaaaan!”
“Don’t you ‘Sakura-chan’ me, Naruto! I don’t want to hear it!”

The three genin of Team 7 made their way back into Tazuna’s house that afternoon, Sasuke and Sakura on foot, with Naruto between them bound tight. Upon their arrival at the construction site, they’d been surprised to find most of the workers gone, replaced by dozens of Naruto clones. According to the old bridge builder, the blonde and the clones had spent most of the day laboring on the bridge.

Naturally, they’d been surprised at their teammates’ cleverness, but Sakura’s logic kicked in and she immediately demanded that Naruto release the jutsu before she hurt herself. Of course, Naruto had assured her that she and her chakra reserves were perfectly fine. This, of course infuriated Sasuke – where on earth did she get such stamina? – but Sakura would hear none of it. She’d gone straight to Kakashi with her complaint and he agreed that it was unwise of Naruto – despite her mastery of the Jounin-level jutsu – to use it over and over repeatedly for extended periods of time. The girl had to take a break sometime, didn’t she?

Entering the sitting room, the two dropped her on the floor. “Ack! Could you two be any rougher?!?”

Tsunami peeked her head into the room, curiosity on her face. “What’s going on here?”

Sakura smiled at the older woman before frowning at the blonde once again. “Naruto here is to stay here and get some rest—” She started to object but was halted by angry green eyes. “Sensei’s orders.” *SO STAY PUT, YOU BLOCKHEAD! SHAAA!*

“You weren’t hurt were you, Naruto-san?” Tsunami asked, fully entering the room to give the girl a worried glance. She didn’t miss the blonde’s stunned look of surprise, quickly covered over by a sullen pout directed at her female teammate.

“Not yet, anyway,” Sakura answered, placing her hands on her hips. “Honestly, Naruto, just because you can make solid Bunshin clones doesn’t mean that you make 60 and have them running around for hours!” It was hard to say who had been more surprised by the sight. She continued on with her lecture, wagging a finger at her. “Don’t you know that your chakra gets divided up as many times as you replicate? Are you trying to use up all your chakra? Chakra Depletion is very serious!”

The sullen pout vanished from Naruto’s face, once again replaced by honest confusion. She blinked at her. “You… you’re worried about me…?”

That brought Sakura up short, causing her to blush slightly. She remembered Sasuke’s words from earlier. “You’re my teammate,” she said. “I certainly don’t want you to drop dead or anything…”

Naruto glanced away, the fox-grin slipping over her face. However, this time the others noticed how fake it looked. She forced out a laugh. “Boy, it sure seems like it sometimes…”

Sakura had the grace to look embarrassed. Sure Naruto was annoying at times, but she certainly didn’t hate her. She knew that… didn’t she? Remembering her sensei’s words about the blonde’s past, she immediately felt like a heel. “Er, like I said, Kakashi-sensei wants you to rest up. You never know when we’ll need to fight again.”

Sasuke frowned.

Naruto nodded. “Hai, hai, Sakura-chan!”

Noticing the tense mood had lifted, Tsunami smiled. “Don’t worry,” she said, placing a hand on a
bewildered Naruto’s shoulder. “I’ll keep an eye on Naruto-san for you,” Said blonde balked at having to be baby-sat, but something told the older woman that she really didn’t mind.

“Thank you, Tsunami-san,” Sakura bowed. With that, she and Sasuke left to continue their shift at the bridge.

Waiting until they were gone, Naruto sighed and began the task of freeing herself from the ropes keeping her bound.

Tsunami blinked at her quick progress. “Those looked like they were very tight,” she ventured.

Naruto grinned at her. “I wouldn’t be a good ninja if I couldn’t get out of a couple knotted ropes.” She paused, thoughtful. “They underestimate my greatness!”

The older woman smiled gently, her maternal eyes catching the troubled expression flitting briefly across the girl’s face. “I don’t believe your friends meant to hurt your feelings,” she said. “They were just worried about you hurting yourself…”

“Oh, I know that,” Naruto sighed. “I guess they keep forgetting I’m not the doofus I pretend to be…” She shrugged. “Not like I make it any easier…”

Tsunami frowned in confusion. “What do you mean…?”

“I keep a lot of secrets.” Blue eyes met hers. At her confused expression, Naruto continued, “We haven’t been teammates all that long, so I guess we’re all still adjustin’ to each other… Still, no matter what, I’m not gonna let them down. They’re some of my precious people now.” Free from her ropes, she headed back towards the door.

“Naruto…” Tsunami rose after her. “Your Sensei wanted you to rest…” She folded her arms, giving her a chiding look. “That means no training.”

‘Ack… she’s just like Iruka-sensei!’ Grinning guilty, Naruto scratched her head abashedly. “Hai, hai, Tsunami-san, I promise I won’t.” The older woman gave her a doubtful look. “I’m just gonna go for a walk. I’ll be back before dinner, I promise!”

She was out the door before Tsunami could object, leaving her to give an exasperated sigh.

oooo

Kakashi surveyed the progress of the bridge, his eye registering honest surprise. “Well, now…”

Standing beside him, Tazuna grinned smugly. “Heh, that little imp of yours sure took a chunk out of our workload.”

“No kidding,” another worker agreed, looking over their work schedule. “S’matter of fact, we’re way ahead of schedule!”

Closing his eye in a grin, Kakashi replied, “I’m glad to hear it.”

Tazuna chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck with his ever present towel. “She’s somethin’ else, that kid. Never seen nobody like her,” He paused, glancing at the ninja. “Don’t know what happened to her that was so bad, but she doesn’t deserve it. Not one bit.”

Kakashi remained silent.

Realizing he was not going to get any information, Tazuna gave up the ghost, turning back to
survey his team. “Ah well, guess it ain’t my business anyway…. Back to work we go!” He started to walk away. “After all, can’t have her thinking we need her to do our work for us… I’d never hear the end of it!”

The Jounin grinned once again.

oooo

She was here once again.

The figure stared at the blonde in the distance, fast asleep at the base of the tree. ‘Why must we meet like this…?’ Approaching the leaf genin was difficult – she was so defenseless. ‘I should kill you now… But…’ The senbon in hand faltered at the soft smile that drifted across her face. ‘Why do I hesitate…? What is it about you that stays my hand…?’

~ “But for some reason, talking with you made me feel a little better.” ~

Bright blue eyes so open and honest despite the hurt and pain lingering beneath the surface; what was it about them…?

The blonde stirred, and the figure reached forward to lay a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, wake up.”

Blue eyes opened and blinked a few times before focusing on the figure’s face. Happiness registered almost instantly. “Neesan, you’re back!”

‘Neesan’ smiled softly. “So I am. You wanted to meet again, ne?”

The blonde nodded. “I’m glad!” She paused, a slight pink tint spreading across her face. “I had a question for you… I hope you don’t mind…”

“Yes?”

“I know we won’t be here for very long, but, um…” The blush on her face deepened. It was very cute.

‘Cute…?’

“Well, I was wondering… if maybe we could be friends…?”

Silence. “You want to be friends…?”

“Um, yeah… if it’s all right,” She looked down, embarrassed. “You said we had a lot in common so I thought it would be nice if I could call you my friend… I really don’t have that many, but I thought it would be okay…”

‘I don’t have many either…’ A masked ninja came to mind, only to be pushed gently away. “I would like very much to be your friend.”

“Really?” ‘Neesan’ was suddenly enveloped in a deep hug. “That’s so great!” The blonde remembered herself moments after, pulling back in embarrassment. “Sorry, that was rude of me…”

“No… that’s all right…” ‘How long has it been since I’ve been hugged…?’

The blonde was still blushing, muttering under her breath. “What’sa matter with you, dummy, you’re actin’ all girly!”
“There’s something wrong with being girly?”

The blonde blinked. “Huh? Oh no… I’m just not used it yet, I guess…” She rubbed her head, pausing when her stomach rumbled loudly. She flushed once again. “Sorry…”

“That’s all right,” ‘Neesan’ smiled, reaching into a basket beside her. She pulled out a wrapped onigiri, holding it out as an offering. “Here, have this.”

The blonde accepted it with an awed expression. “For me?”

“You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

She nodded, attacking it with gusto. “So, have you lived here long?”

“No, I’m… just passing through.”

“Not alone, right?”

There was a pause. “There is… someone with me.”

The blonde grinned. “Your precious person, right?”

There was a nod followed by an honest smile. “Yes… he’s done a great deal for me. I owe him very much.” ‘And yet here I am… with one of his enemies… So why do I not feel as guilty as I should…?’

“That sounds like my Iruka-sensei,” the blonde mused. “He’s one of the first people to ever acknowledge me…”

“You’re very lucky then.”

“You are, too, y’know.” The blonde replied. “You’ve got your precious person… and…” She paused, finishing her rice ball before facing the other girl with a grin. “And now you’ve got me, too!”

The girl started back at her in surprise. She didn’t know anything about this girl, but for some reason her words felt so right… “Yes… that’s true…”

The blonde nodded and started to speak again when another voice in the distance broke the silence. She craned her head, grinning in resignation.

“You recognize that person?” She felt disappointed for the intrusion. But why…?

The blonde nodded. “Yup, that’s Sakura-chan; she’s my teammate. She’s a little bossy, and really aggressive, but overall she’s really nice.” There was a pause. “You wanna meet her?”

“That’s all right…” ‘I’ve already stayed too long… he’ll be wondering where I’ve gone…” “I need to be going. We’ll be moving on soon.”

The blonde’s face fell. “Oh… do you think we’ll be able to meet up one last time before you go?” she asked hopefully. “I really liked talking with you.”

“I… don’t know…”

“Oh, well, that’s okay…”
“But if we don’t…” The blonde let out an ‘eep’ as the other girl moved towards her, suddenly inches away from her face. “I’m happy that we met.”

The blonde’s face was very red now. ‘Too cute…!’ “N-n-n-nessan!” she squeaked out. “I’m a girl--!” Her words died as their lips met in a light kiss.

‘Neesan’ pulled away, smiling softly. “I know,” she said. “But I’m not.”

With that, ‘she’ walked away, leaving the blushing genin standing in the clearing.

Zabuza glanced up as his subordinate entered the room. He spared his attire an amused glance before turning back to the task of removing his bandages. He often donned female clothing to disguise himself when they travelled. He certainly had the face for it and people were less likely to be suspicious of a lone young girl than a solitary ninja.

That said, while his clothing was not cause for concern, he gave the light-hearted expression on his face careful consideration... Meh, he’d set it aside to worry over some other time. What the kid did in his down time was his own business. So long as it didn't interefere with their work.

Still… “Where were you?”

There was a long pause. “Out looking for medicines…” was his response. “For your injuries.”

He was lying; not that it mattered, of course. “I don’t need them.” The last of his bandages fell away. “Tomorrow we’re going after the Bridge builder. If those Leaf fools get in our way,” He turned and reached for his zanbatou, missing the pained expression on his subordinate’s face. “We kill them. Got it, Haku?”

Haku, or ‘Neesan’, noded slowly. “Yes… Zabuza-sama.”

End Chapter 5
Chapter 6a: To Take Revenge

Chapter Summary

It doesn't take long for the mission to go downhill.

But you knew that already...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 6

Naruto was still standing in the clearing when Sakura finally found her. The reprimand she had prepared for the blonde fell from her lips as she took in the dazed expression on her face. The pink kunoichi paused a few paces away, puzzled. Here was yet another expression she couldn't recall ever seeing on her teammate's face before. However, such puzzling would have to wait - it was getting late and she was not about to be caught out in the woods defenseless with only a spaced-out blonde as her back-up.

'Even if that blonde is still so much stronger than you...' a voice in the back of her head niggled. Ignoring it, she closed the distance between them, pulling a no-nonsense frown to her face. "There you are, Naruto!" she exclaimed loudly, hoping it would draw the blonde's attention to her. It didn't. "I've been looking all over for you!" She came up behind her, tapping her on the shoulder, lightly. "Naruto?"

She half-expected her to turn around swinging, but instead blue eyes fell on her, blinking a few times before actually recognizing her. "Hey... Sakura-chan..."

Sakura's frown deepened slightly. Had she just experienced a genjutsu or something? Why couldn't she have just stayed put with Tsunami like she was supposed to? "What's the matter with you?" Despite herself, worry could be heard beneath her exasperated tone. "You didn't hurt yourself training, did you? Kakashi-sensei ordered you not to --"

"I wasn't training," said the blonde. "Honest!"

Her frown turned slightly suspicious. "Then why are you being so weird? And why is your face so red?" The blonde's cheeks only darkened further. Sakura stared in surprise; was she actually blushing? Just what was going on? "What, did you fry your brains out this morning while training or something?"

Naruto blinked at her before letting out a raucous laugh. "You're so funny, Sakura-chan!"

Honestly, she hadn't found anything remotely funny about her statement. The blonde grinned obliviously, turning away. "C'mon, we better head back, ne! Let's go!"

"Naruto... Tazuna-san's house is that way."
"I swear, you're being so weird!"

"Weird, Sakura-chan?"

"...Well, weirder than normal..." Green eyes studied the blonde as the two kunoichi made their way into Tazuna's home. The blonde grinning uneasily under the other girl's intense scrutiny. "I mean, what were you even doing out there anyway? You were supposed to be resting."

Naruto blinked, "I went for a walk, just like I told Tsunami-san."

"But I heard another voice before I found you," The other two teammates, seated at the kitchen table much like the day before, turned their attentions towards their conversation now, their expressions curious. "Was there somebody else with you?"

With all eyes suddenly on her, Naruto blushed once again.

Tazuna grinned at the blonde. "Ahhh, I see how it is," The three youths in the room turned to him. "You were having a secret liaison with your lover, weren't you?"

"Father," Tsunami admonished. "Honestly, you and your imagination..." She turned to Naruto, expecting her to refute the claim, but the blonde was sputtering helplessly.

Her mind went back to the kimono-clad boy and the parting kiss he had left her. Her face was as red as Sakura's dress. "H-h-he's not my boyfriend!"

"Oh, so it was a boy...? Heh heh, maybe you're not such a tough guy after all."

"When'd you have time to make friends with anyone?" Sasuke paused, surprised at himself for even voicing the question aloud. Why did it have matter to him anyway? It's not like he cared how the moron spent her time, right?

"I've only met him twice, but he's real nice..." Naruto admitted honestly as she slumped into a chair beside their teacher. "We've got a whole lot in common..." The boy's sad brown eyes and understanding smile suddenly came to mind.

"This boy... that's a friend of yours..." The sound of Kakashi's slow drawl roused Naruto from her thoughts. "He's a villager...?"

Naruto's face fell slightly. "No, he's travelling... him and another friend of his... they said they'd be leaving soon..."

Tsunami frowned in sympathy, but Kakashi's visible eye narrowed slightly. It wasn't possible, was it...? 'If that's true... why didn't he kill her...?' He turned to question the blonde further, only to find her head pillowed against the table, fast asleep.

"Naruto..." Though asleep, the goofy grin was still present on the blonde's face. Sakura sighed, shaking her head. "I guess she fried her brains after all!"

Tsunami sighed sadly. "You all are training so hard..." She bowed her head low, hiding the tears rimming her eyes. "I don't know how we can ever properly thank you..."

"You've already helped us a whole bunch, Tsunami-san," Sakura smiled. "I mean, just the other day Naruto was going on and on about how she liked your cooking. 'Second only to Ichiraku' she said."
The woman blushed in embarrassment, even though she had no idea who or what an 'Ichiraku' was.

Kakashi only chuckled, collecting the girl in his arms and carrying her upstairs. 'Rest up, Naruto,' he thought, his eye closing in a grin. 'You're gonna need it.'

oooo

'Ninja... stupid fools think they know everything...' Behind tinted glasses, Gatou scowled. For all their strength and skill they were useless when another, stronger ninja came along. It only went further to prove what he had believed all along. Only one sort of strength was necessary - the strength found one found in money. So long as you possessed it, there was nothing that was beyond your reach.

However, there was still the matter of the Bridge Builder to attend to. He couldn't very well allow said bridge to be completed - it would ruin everything. He'd had every intention of having them taken care of, and even that hadn't turned out as he'd expected. To think... that the supposed Demon Ninja of the Mist would fall so easily to a school marm out with his students on Field Trip Day! It was pathetic!

At the mention of said nukenin under his employ... He'd gone to confront the Mist-nin for his abysmal failures only to be waylaid by his little punk of a subordinate. Could you believe the brat had actually broken his arm? Sputtering such nonsense about 'laying a filthy hand on Zabuza-sama'.

Zabuza-sama... Zabuza-SAMA...?!

Who was some prissy little snot to talk to him, Gatou, the wealthiest man in Nami no Kuni, in such a disrespectful way? Didn't he know who he was? Didn't he fear his power?

Perhaps not... but Gatou would rectify that. Make no mistake.

Turning to one of his own subordinates, some two-bit samurai thug, he barked out, "Where are they now?"

"They've gone to the bridge," came the quick response.

So, they were finally getting to work, huh? Too bad he'd already lost patience with them. "Let them have their fun then," he sneered. "I want you and one of your men to go to the Bridge Builder's house - kill whoever you find there." The samurai grinned at the prospect of violence. "It's about time we remind everyone who's in charge around here."

As the samurai nodded and left, Gatou chuckled darkly to himself at the promise of his plans finally coming to fruition. After all, as the saying went, if you wanted something done, you had to do it yourself.

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Opening her eyes slowly, the first thing Naruto saw was the dark, sullen face of Inari. She squealed, ducking back under the covers of her futon. 'Wait... futon... wasn't I downstairs...?'

"Squealing like a little girl... You sure you're a ninja?"

Naruto glared at him and he glared right back. "What're you doing here?" she demanded. "How'd I get upstairs?"
"Your weirdo sensei carried you up here," he answered after a long pause. "Two days ago."

At that she jumped up out of bed, slightly surprised she was still in her clothes. "Two days?!"

'Though I'm not sure whether to be happy or disgusted I'm not in my pjs...' Musing over this, she laughed a little, sitting back down. "I guess Sakura-chan was right, I fried my brains after all!" Inari gave her a measuring look. "What?"

"Why are you training so hard?"

Without pausing to think, she replied, "So that I can complete my mission."

"All this for a stupid mission?"

"It's not stupid," Naruto argued. "Your Granddad's dream is to complete his bridge so everybody in your village can thrive again. I have to be strong and protect him... so you don't lose any more precious people."

The little boy started in surprise. How had she known...?

The blonde grinned, "I'm a lot smarter than people give me credit..."

Inari looked slightly doubtful. "But you act like a doofus when your teammates are around."

Her blue eyes twinkled mischievously. "It's easier to surprise people when they don't know what to expect from you."

A smirk slowly blooming across his face, Inari let out a small snort. "You're weird."

If it were at all possible, her grin widened even further. "Thanks!"

Despite himself, Inari laughed a little.

Naruto was about to make another comment when a strange sound caught her attention; there was some rustling coming from downstairs, followed by the breaking of glass.

Having heard it as well, Inari frowned and rose to his feet. "Ma...?" A hand stilled his movement and he turned to Naruto in confusion, only to have her silence him with a finger to her lips.

The smile was gone from her face, replaced by a stern frown. "Something ain't right," she murmured. Reaching for the kunai pouch that lay beside her futon, she edged towards the door.

Inari followed behind her, and the two slowly made their way downstairs into the sitting room only to find it completely turned upside-down. Chairs had been overturned, glasses and picture frames smashed to pieces.

The perpetrators of said vandalism stood before them, Tsunami standing between them with a frightened look on her face.

Seeing the sight of his mother in danger, Inari let out a strangled cry, rushing towards her. "MA!"

He was spared from possibly imminent danger by Naruto blocking his path.

The first thug smirked, giving the two youths a once over. Two little kids against them? Like taking candy from a baby... "Well, well, what've we here?"

The second thug turned to him, sharing his amusement. "Looks like we got ourselves two more hostages." Drawing out his blade, he sniggered quietly. "Come over here quietly an' we won't have to hurt you."
Inari shuddered in fear.

Naruto, however, let out an indignant snort. "You kidding?" She folded her arms over her chest. "You couldn't hurt me if you tried."

Thug #2 blinked in surprise. "What?"

"You heard me," A grim smirk made its way across her whiskered face. "You think we're scared of you two? Some two-bit hoods? What a joke!"

The thug holding Tsunami snarled and pushed the woman aside, intent on putting the blonde in her place, tanto in hand. Unfortunately Naruto was prepared for him. She side-stepped him, knocking the short blade out of his grip with a swift hand-chop that had it flying into the wall beside Inari's head. The thug seemed bewildered she had managed to disarm him so easily, but he soon found himself unconscious courtesy of a blow to the back of his neck.

"Inari," Naruto snapped, cutting off any retort the boy would have made about being cautious. "Grab your mom and get outta here!"

He blinked. Was she serious? "But you --"

"Nobody's goin' anywhere!" Though the second thug was surprised his comrade had been disabled so quickly, he vowed he would not share the same fate. Before she could cross the floor to meet her son, the thug grabbed Tsunami by her hair, pulling her back towards him.

"MA!" Inari quailed at the sight of the blade at her pale throat. He couldn't allow his mother to die! He had to do something - anything!

"DIE!" The blade sunk in for the kill, but was suddenly met with resistance. "Wha...?" What had once been his hostage was replaced by a short, stubby tree stump. "Eh...?"

"So impatient..." He glanced up to meet the whiskered face of the blonde before everything faded to black. After he dropped to the ground, Naruto sighed and wiped her hands against her pant legs.

"Well, that takes care of that, ne, Inari-kun?"

He gaped at her in surprise. "But... but... my Ma..."

She grinned at him before turning away. "Tsunami-san, you all right?"

The closet door opened and out stepped the young boy's mother, a little tussled, but no worse for the wear. "Ah, yes..." She rubbed at her head, confused as to what had happened. "But how did I...?"

"No time for questions!" Naruto was already set about the task of tying up the two attackers. "With those two clowns here, that means No-Eyebrows and his sidekick are on their way to the bridge - if they're not there already..."

Inari gasped, watching her with wide frightened eyes. "You mean you're going after them?" She nodded with a grin on her face. "But you can't! You --"

Naruto gave him a reassuring pat on the head. "What did I tell you before?" she asked. "It's my job to look after your Granddad -- annoying old goofball that he is -- I can't let anything bad happen to him. I also can't just stand by while my teammates are in trouble, either."

Though her son was still confused, Tsunami nodded in understanding. She smiled, even though her
eyes shone with worry. "I hope you're able to get there in time." she said.

"Of course I will!" Naruto crowed. "The hero always shows up just in the knick of time to save the day!" She bounded out the door, waving as she went. "See ya later!"

"Be careful!" Inari called after her.

"Don't worry." Tsunami was beside him, resting her hands on his shoulders. "I'm sure everything will be just fine."

He nodded, watching the blonde vanish from sight. "I know... 'cuz Naruto's strong."


She could hear the sounds of the two Jounin's battle - metal clashing against metal. Sasuke was out there somewhere as well, engaging the mysterious masked nin who had turned out to be the missing nin's subordinate after all. Everything on the bridge was shrouded in the mist from the nukenin's jutsu, and the poor kunoichi had no clue as to who was winning or losing. She was all alone, the last line of defense between Tazuna and the enemy.

'What happens if they fail...?' her mind wondered, not for the first time that day. *I'm not strong enough to protect Tazuna on my own... I need help... I need...'*

"Sakura-chan!" Both she and Tazuna looked up in surprise at the sight of the blonde kunoichi emerging out of the mist towards them.

Sakura's eyes threatened to spill tears of relief before she managed to regain some of her composure. "Naruto! You're here!"

The blonde's grinning response caused some of the tension to leave the old bridge builder's body. "You brat, took you long enough!" he exclaimed, though the relief was also evident in his tone. "How'd you even find us through this mess?"

"Followed my nose, ya old geezer!" came her laughing response. "Maybe ya should lay off the sauce a bit, ne?"

If they survived this, not a single drop of liquor would cross his lips ever again...

"Naruto!" The blonde turned towards her teammate and the worry still in her eyes. "I'm worried about Kakashi-sensei... and Sasuke-kun! He's fighting that masked boy from before. I don't know what's going on..."

"Don't worry 'bout him, Sakura-chan," she placated. "I'm sure tht teme'll be okay. He's pretty tough, y'know."

"But I can't do anything..." The blonde blinked in confusion. Sakura gazed back at her, her expression fretful. "Every time, it's been you by his side... fighting the enemy... it's your strength that's..."

"Sakura-chan...?"

"Please..." Sakura grasped Naruto's hands, staring into her eyes pleadingly. "Please help Sasuke-kun. I'll keep Tazuna-san safe..." *It's all I can do...*

Blue eyes met hers in understanding. "I will, Sakura-chan. I promise." With that said, she turned
and ran off, vanishing into the fog.

Sakura watched her go, aware of the weight of Tazuna's hand on her shoulder. 'Please be safe...' she thought. 'All three of you...'

oooo

Sasuke wiped the sweat from his eyes, taking gasping breaths as he surveyed his surroundings. The masked ninja had been dancing circles around him since the beginning of their fight. He'd even gone so far to erect mirrors of ice that surrounded him on all sides, and he'd vanish into these mirrors to reappear elsewhere to attack. 'Is it some sort of genjutsu...?' He'd suspected so at first, but the pain he'd felt from the senbon being hurled at him had definitely been real. A bloodline limit perhaps? He scowled and wiped his eyes again, ignoring the burning sensation he felt behind them. Was there nothing he could do against this guy? Was he really that weak?

'No... I'm not weak...' He clenched his hands in fists, fighting back those insecure feelings. His brother... his teammate... He'd defeat them both, but first... "I will beat you!"

The masked ninja emerged from a mirror behind him, senbon ready in hand. "I sense your frustration," he said calmly. "You know this battle is pointless and yet you refuse to submit. Why don't you just accept it...? It is foolish for you to continue..."

The Uchiha scowled, studying his opponent. "That's not gonna happen!" The other ninja sighed and then glanced away, as if expecting something. Now was his chance! His hands were already flying through the seals. "Katon: Goukakyu no Jutsu!"

The ninja stared at the plume of flame shooting towards him. never budging. "That didn't work the first time you tried it..." He stepped back, melding into the mirror behind him.

'Damn it!' Sasuke tensed, preparing for the nin's next onslaught. The burning behind his eyes increased, and he squinted to ward it off, only to pause in shock. Was the other ninja moving more slowly? He watched as the mist nin raised his arm, hurling senbon in his direction. 'I can... I can see his movements...?' He dodged the first attack, and then flipped back to avoid the second, watching as the senbon harmlessly imbedded themselves into the pavement in front of him.

Needle in hand, Haku paused to study his opponent. 'Has he gotten faster...?' Behind his mask, brown eyes narrowed in understanding as he hurled another volley. 'No... he can read my movements...' He cursed slightly, shifting to another mirror. 'I suppose I've stalled long enough... I have to end this...' Raising his hand to deliver another attack, his actions were halted when the mirror beside him shattered into a thousands pieces as a large hunk of cement crashed through it, landing at his feet with a loud thunk

Sasuke's eyes were wide in surprise. "What the hell...?!" He stared at the hole the hunk had created, eyes widening even further at the blonde kunoichi that stepped through to survey, no doubt her handiwork. 'Naruto...?!'

Poking at a few dangling shards, Naruto grinned ruefully. "Eee... I hope I don't get 7 years of bad luck behind this... my life's difficult enough as it is..."

Shifting to another mirror, Haku felt a twinge of pain. 'So, you've come after all...'

The dark haired leaf genin stared at his comrade as she slowly meandered towards him. As if a battle to the death hadn't been going on just moments ago... "You broke through...?"

Blue eyes shifted to him. "It took a couple tries..." she answered honestly. "That stuff's cold like
ice, but it's reinforced with chakra... so, I figured chakra reinforced ice, chakra reinforced rock... It took me a couple tries to keep the cement from breaking under the stress, but... " She shrugged. "I got the hang of it I guess..."

'She's clever...' Haku remarked silently.

Naruto gave her fellow genin a once over, taking stock of all of his injuries. "You all right?" she asked softly.

Sasuke turned away from her angrily. "I'm fine." he ground out. He wasn't weak. "You should've stayed with the bridge builder."

"What fun would that have been?"

"I don't need your help."

The blonde's expression turned doubtful. "Says the one bleeding all over the place -- eh?!" Senbon rained down over them suddenly and quick to act, Naruto dove on top of him, shielding his body with hers. "Damn it... that hurts!"

"What the hell are you doing!" Sasuke shoved her off with a sharp elbow to the gut. "I told you don't need --!"

Wincing, Naruto fixed him with a dry glare. "What, so I should just abandon you? Sorry, but that's not gonna happen, asshole!" She slowly rose to her feet, pulling him up with her despite his silent protests. "Konoha ninja stick together."

"Admirable, but foolish..." Haku's image appeared around them on all sides. "Staying means death, you know."

Putting her back to Sasuke's, Naruto faced the mirror in front of her with a grim smirk. "We all gotta die someday," she said, drawing a kunai from her pouch. "But I don't plan on dying today - I got dreams to fulfill."

"Dreams...?" Haku raised his arm. "I, too, have dreams. We shall see whose are the strongest!" He punctuated his words with another onslaught of his needles. The two leaf nin dodged the attack.

"Fine by me!" Naruto moved to rush towards him, only to be held back by Sasuke.

"Hold on," Sasuke ground out.

She glared, yanking her arm free from his grip. "What, Sasuke? You want me to go?" Her eyes darkened in anger. "I told you I don't abandon my teammates! And certainly not my friends! So just shut up cuz you're stuck with me!"

Taken aback by her vehemence, it took several moments for Sasuke to recover enough to continue his original thought. "I know..." he said softly, causing her to blink at him in surprise. "Just... keep him busy for me all right? I've got a plan."

Naruto's anger melted away, replaced by a mischievous grin. "That's better," She turned, redirecting her attention on the masked ninja in front of her. "All right, Kamen-san, let's play!" She brought her hands together in her favorite seal. "KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!"

To say Haku was surprised would be an understatement. 'She knows a jounin-level jutsu...?' The obviousness of the statement became clear when the blonde ninja was replaced by 12 duplicates.
Behind his mask he frowned. 'It doesn't matter!'

Sasuke watched the display with stunned eyes. As many times as the mist nin would destroy her clones, Naruto would just replace them with more. 'Where does she get it from... all that stamina...?' Remembering the task he had set for himself, he shook his head to clear his thoughts. With a deep cleansing breath, he closed his eyes, focusing his own chakra. 'Okay, Sasuke, it's time to put your own training to work...'

Haku evaded another of Naruto's bunshin with practiced ease, frowning in frustration when it was just replaced by another. 'Where is the real one? It shouldn't be this difficult to tell!' Shifting out of his mirror, he prepared to attack once again only to be slammed into from the side. He looked up, narrowly avoiding a sweeping kick from the dark-haired Uchiha.

Naruto and her clones blinked in surprise. 'He got there so fast... How...?'

Sasuke smirked, staring at the masked face of his opponent.

Haku gasped. "Those eyes... they're the same..." The younger boy's eyes, once dark as coal, were now a crimson red, punctuated by two black tomoe.

A clone closer to the scene passed the information along to the original, causing Naruto to gape in surprise. "He's got Sharingan!"

The moment suddenly broken by the blonde's exclamation, Sasuke drew several shuriken from his pouch, hurling them at Haku as he rushed forward. Haku threw senbon in retaliation, but they were easily evaded. 'He has gotten faster...' The missing nin felt a rush of apprehension - not for fear of losing, but in the knowledge of what he knew he now had to do. 'I cannot put it off any longer...'

Sasuke scowled as his opponent slipped back into on of his mirrors, vanishing from sight.

"Where's he gonna reappear...?" Naruto called out.

Sasuke didn't answer, red eyes darting back and forth. 'To the left, the right... behind...?'

Haku emerged slowly from one of his mirrors, staring down at the blonde head beneath him.

'Please forgive me... dear friend...'

'Below... No... above...!' Sasuke's eyes shot to Naruto, then to the glint of metal above her head. 'Shit!' "Naruto!"

She blinked in surprise as he rushed towards her, knocking her to the ground. A cry of outrage died on her lips as the sound of senbon hitting flesh reached her ears. "Sasuke...?" She shifted, eyes widening at the amount of needles protruding out of the body of her teammate. "Wha..." She gulped, hardly believing her eyes. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

He wheezed, struggling to rise to his feet. The red had faded from his eyes, leaving a glazed charcoal behind. "I don't know..." he murmured. His legs buckled beneath him and he dropped to his knees, earning a startled yelp from the blonde beside him. "Damn, that was stupid of me..."

"Sasuke..." Naruto reached for him, hands shaking and hesitant. "You shouldn't have -- you took way too many hits already!"

"I know that!" he snapped with more energy than he felt he could have mustered.

"Then why?!"
"How should I know...?" Her eyes paled in disbelief. "My body moved on its own..." Letting out a groan, he pitched forward, landing in her arms.

"Sasuke!" Naruto shook him wildly, earning a groan and a glare for her efforts. "No, no, no, no! You can't do this ---! Sakura-chan---!"

Sasuke stared up at her with hazy eyes. "I wanted only one thing..." She blinked at him. "That man... the one who killed my family... I wanted to kill him..."

She remembered him saying something similar during their first team introduction. "Who is he...?"

"My brother..." He ignored her gasp of surprise. "I wanted to avenge them all... that was my dream..." He paused, meeting her wide, glassy eyes. "No matter what... don't die... don't you die... Naruto... to..." His eyes slowly slid shut.

"Sasuke!!" Naruto leant down closer to Sasuke only to be knocked back and away from him by another onslaught of senbon. She hit the ground, rolling several feet away, groaning in pain. "Sasuke..."

Haku withdrew himself fully from his mirror, touching down several feet away. "Forgive me..." he said quietly, seeing the raw physical and spiritual hurt and disbelief behind her eyes. "I never wished to cause you any harm, but you and your friend are an obstacle in my master's path." He paused, lowering his head in something akin to shame. "You had to be removed."

Naruto lay on the ground, unmoving. "Sasuke..."

"It is painful to lose someone precious to you..." His mind dredged up images of his own past--his mother, lying cold and unresponsive on the kitchen floor--but he quickly forced them back down. "However, such is the life of the shinobi..." He walked towards her slowly. "Take comfort in knowing his death was quick."

'Dead...? Sasuke is dead...?' She turned her head, his body coming into her line of vision. His was still, his body show no signs of life. Her mind supplied images of him glaring at her, calling her names...

'Dead...' Fighting along side her against those mist chunins...

Protecting her from harm. 'Dead...'

At the sudden shift in the air, Haku tensed as the blonde slowly rose to her feet. 'Impossible... She shouldn't be able to move...!'"

"You tell me to take comfort in his death..." Her voice was deceptively quiet, so much that Haku almost had to strain to hear. "I cannot... I will not..." She clenched her hands at her sides. "I hated Sasuke, but he was my teammate... my friend... You took away one of my precious people... You took away something that was mine..." Oblivious to her, red chakra began forming in the air, licking around her like flames.

Haku was not so lucky. He took a step back in apprehension at the crimson eyes staring at him. They were not like the Sharingan eyes, they were darker; her pupils drew thin and narrow, slanted like a cat's and filled with murderous intent.

"And for that... " Her lips curled in a feral grin. "You die."
The two jounin halted their attacks towards each other at the sudden rush of foreign chakra filling the air. It was so sudden, so powerful...

'What is this...' Zabuza's eyes narrowed. 'This foul chakra...?' He'd never felt anything like it. Turning to Kakashi, he scowled in confusion. "Is this your doing, Kakashi?"

The Leaf Jounin didn't answer, trying to reign in the feeling of fear at the familiarity of the chakra charging the air. There was no forgetting chakra like that - especially when his last time experience with it had spelled the death of the last person he'd ever held dear. 'But that's impossible...' Both regular and Sharingan eyes widened in horror. 'The seal couldn't have broken could it... Naruto...?!

She sat up slowly, staring around her in confusion. All around her was darkness. 'What... what is this...?'

~ THIS IS HELL. ~

She didn't recognize the voice, but before she could ask an image of Sasuke's body appeared before her eyes, cold and unresponsive. Her eyes widened in remembrance. "He's gone... he's really gone..."

~ SHOULD YOU NOT BE GLAD? YOU HATED HIM...~

"Of course I hated him! He was a jerk!" She clenched her fists, staring out into the darkness. "But he was my teammate... and I promised Sakura-chan that I'd help him. I told Inari that I'd protect everyone!"

Sasuke's body was replaced by the mist nin who took his life. ~ HE KILLED YOUR TEAMMATE. HE TRIES TO KILL YOU. HE TRIES TO TAKE WHAT IS YOURS...~

Naruto closed her eyes, opening them once again to reveal they were red and slitted. "...take what is mine..."

Suddenly she was back at the bridge, facing down the mist ninja... the one who had killed her teammate. If nothing else, she would make him pay.

Haku tensed, watching the young blonde before him. What was this... this power that seemed to radiate from the girl? He watched as the chakra pooling around her - chakra was not supposed to be red, nor visible! - changed her form. Her injuries healed, her nails and teeth elongated slightly, the whisker-like scars becoming more pronounced on her round face; it was like the cute girl he had befriended was vanishing right before his eyes. 'This... this transformation... I must put a stop to it!'

And what then...? It wasn't as if things could go back to normal between them - if you could even consider what they'd been normal...

~ "You are, too, y'know. You've got your precious person and now you've got me, too!" ~

Shaking his head, Haku drew another handful of senbon and hurled it at the girl. She held her ground, letting out an animalistic roar that knocked the projectiles away with an invisible wall of sound. "Such awesome power..."

The blonde vanished from sight, appearing before him to shatter the mirror he had tried to hide in.

"She was strong before..." He dodged a swipe of her claws, sliding backwards a few feet. "but not
like this..." Was this her power? Was this what set her apart from others and made her an outcast? He began forming seals at a rapid speed. "Hyoton: Shi no Kakera!"

Sharp spears of ice rose out of the ground, hovering over his head. With a flick of his hand, they sped towards Naruto.

She avoided them easily, continuing towards him as if nothing were amiss. Her hands were poised to strike. "DIE!!"

'I can't... I can't stop her...!' Haku backed up towards his remaining mirrors, arms raised to block the strike intended for him. Unfortunately from him, Naruto slipped under his guard, her smaller hands clenching to land a fist directly to his face. The blow sent him crashing through his own mirror and backwards through the air, his porcelain mask falling away as he hit the ground.

"I'm gonna kill you!!" Naruto shrieked, rushing towards him with murder in her eyes. Her movements stilled, however, at the face that lay beneath his mask. Her slitted eyes widened in surprise. "N-nee-chan..."

Haku sat up slowly, his body screaming in pain. Being shoved through a wall of chakra enforced ice would do that to you, he supposed. "My name..." he gasped out. "Is Haku--"

Their brief kiss came to mind suddenly, and then the blonde was suddenly in front of him, his kimono grasped in her clawed hands. "This whole time-- you knew this whole time?!

"I had... my mission..." he gasped. "As you had yours..." He paused, wincing in pain. "That's why... I didn't want you to come..."

She snarled at him, "Why? Because I'd be an obstacle in your master's way?!"

'Because I don't want to hurt you...' "I have to protect my master's dream... I am his tool..." 'And because you are... my friend...'

"His tool?" Her eyes were so sharp, like ice. "What kind of bastard would treat you like just a thing?"

Haku gazed up at her. "All shinobi are tools..." He paused, glancing around at the damage wrought by their fight. Almost all of his mirrors had been completely. "And now I am a broken one..."

"Shut up!" Naruto snapped. "Sasuke is dead because of you!"

"Then kill me."

The youki faded slightly as she blinked in surprise. "What?"

"Kill me," Haku saidly simply. "Take vengeance for your fallen teammate."

The blonde released him, backing away from him slowly. "No... no!"

"You were ready to do so before," Brown eyes gazed at her sadly. "What changed...?"

"I didn't know it was you! You are..." Her resolve wavered. "I thought you were my friend..."

Haku's eyes saddened further. "A friend that betrayed you."

"Shut up. Don't say that."
"It's true." He glanced away. "I befriended you, knowing all the while who you were and what I would have to--"

"SHUT UP!" Naruto knocked him to the ground with another punch to the face. She pounced on him, landing punch after punch, pouring all her anger, sadness, and frustration into each blow. "Shut up, shut up, shut--" Stilling her hand, she dropped down on top of him, clenching at his robes.

Haku was surprised, and even more so at the moisture he felt against his neck. 'Naruto...'

"You said..." Her voice was muffled, but he could still hear her quite clearly. "You said you knew what it was like... You said we were alike..."

"We are." She looked into his eyes, confused. "You said that you didn't know what would have become of you had it not been for your Iruka-sensei... and the kindness he showed you. He acknowledged you... gave you a purpose..." He closed his eyes. "For me, Zabuza-sama was that person. He took me in, knowing what I was. He stayed with me, cared for me... I vowed that I would do whatever I could to repay him... He was my one and only precious person..." He opened his eyes, staring at Naruto. "Until I met you."

She stared at him in surprise.

"I never thought that I would meet another person who understood... who shared my pain..." He smiled. "Talking with you also made me happy... but I was sad at the same time knowing what I would have to do..."

"Haku..."

"You are a very strong ninja, Naruto... I don't regret losing to you," His gaze lifted skyward. "But I cannot continue on knowing that I have failed the most important person in my life. He has depended on me, and I have broken my promise. I have no choice but to suffer the consequences."

He gently pushed Naruto back, slowly and painfully rising to his feet.

"Haku...?"

He backed away from her, bowing his head. "You must kill me. Please."

The blonde only stared at him.

Haku drew a kunai from his pouch. "Must I force you?" He pointed to her teammate's body with his blade. "Or will you break your promise to him as we--" There was a brief, sharp feeling of pain and Haku looked down at the trembling blonde head in front of him. Glancing down at the trembling hands closed around the kunai sticking out of his torso, he closed his eyes, smiling. He hadn't even seen her move... "Thank you, Naruto..."

It took her a few seconds to process what she had done. She stared at her hands before bringing wide, frightened blue eyes back up to his face. "Haku... Haku!"

"It's all right," he gasped, staggering. "I--" He paused, turning his head to where Kakashi and Zabuza still fought. There was still one last thing for him to do... Struggling to raise his arms, he formed his hands into a transportation jutsu, vanishing from sight.

"Haku?!" Naruto stared at where he had once been. "HAKU!!"

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Kakashi had thrown caution to the wind, deciding to take the incapacitated mist nin out quickly so that he could see to his students. 'If it's not already too late...' Chakra crackling loudly in his hand, he charged towards Zabuza only to have his way blocked at the last possible second. His chidori plunged into the younger nin's chest, causing everyone present to freeze in shock.

Zabuza recovered first, laughing out loud. "Very good, Haku! I knew there was a reason I kept you around!"

Kakashi's eyes were wide in disbelief. 'He sacrificed himself...'

Haku's eyes, though wide with pain, fell on his. "Tell her..." he gasped. "That I'm sorry..." Before he could question him, the boy dropped to the ground, dead.

"Hn," Zabuza glanced at his body, before turning his attention back to Kakashi once more.

The Copy Ninja scowled. "No remorse for your partner's death?"

The swordsman snorted. "Partner? Ha... he was my tool, nothing more. He's served his purpose."

"And so have you." Gatou crowed uproariously. Flanked by several dozen thugs, bandits, and samurai, he fixed them all with a vicious, haughty smirk. "Kill 'em all!"

Eyeing the new threat in distaste, Kakashi drew another kunai from his pouch. 'Damn it...'

End Chapter 6

Chapter End Notes

Originally, I was going to combine 6a and b into one chapter, but since the original is split it half I figured why not keep it that way?

It's late and I'm tired. =P
Chapter 6b: A Shinobi is...

Chapter Summary

What is a shinobi's true purpose...?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 6b

The situation was rapidly going down hill. Granted, Gatou's men were hardly anything to be worried about individually, but with his rapidly dwindling chakra their numbers alone would prove them to be a difficult task to handle.

'Sakura needs to stay with Tazuna and keep him safe...' Kakashi thought to himself, eyeing the group slowly gathering on the bridge. 'I can't sense Sasuke anymore and Naruto...' He could still feel the Kyuubi's chakra hanging thickly in the air, keeping his senses on edge. He had to finish this fight quickly before the seal weakened any further. 'But first...'

Gatou snorted as his eyes fell on the figure of the his hired ninja. He was a wreck - both his arms were bleeding and limp at his sides and his freakishly large sword was who knows where. That spiky haired ninja from Leaf had certainly put him through the wringer. Despite his frustration at yet another failure, he grinned at how the mighty had fallen. "Look at you... you're a mess!"

Zabuza narrowed his eyes at him, but for once he felt no fear. What could he do anyway? "You can't even handle four little ninja from Konoha? You're pathetic! I don't know why I even bothered wasting my time with you." He tapped his cane on the ground. "S'matter of fact, consider our contract cancelled."

The mist ninja scowled. "What?!"

"That's right!" Gatou sneered. "I don't need your anymore. My boys here can handle one old man and some punk kids." The large group of thugs and henchmen flanking him on both sides laughed uproariously, brandishing their myriad assortment of weapons. Feeling bold, the old man walked forward a few paces, surveying the battlefield. The two of them certainly had done a lot of damage. His eye caught the body laying off to the side and he smirked, recognizing it as his little mouthy subordinate.

"So, the kid bought the big one, eh? Good riddance to bad rubbish I say," the tycoon paused, taking in the boy's features as he prodded his body with the tip of his cane. "Although, I never thought that's what the brat looked like under that ridiculous mask... A pretty little face like that could have been useful--"

There was a flash of movement and Gatou looked up to see Zabuza rushing over towards him with a kunai clenched in his teeth. He screamed in surprise, ducking behind his men's ranks for protection. "S-stop him!"

One of his men fired his crossbow, hitting the ninja dead on but he kept on. He slashed through them left and right, intent on reaching his target.
As the samurai in front of him fell under Zabuza's last strike, Gatou let out a shriek of fright. "Impossible! You...!" His injuries were so numerous and yet he was still standing?! Gatou's eyes widened in terror at the murderous look in the nukenin's eyes. "I thought..."

The swordsman chuckled darkly, gripping his weapon between sharp, blood-spattered teeth. "Not so pathetic now, am I, Gatou?"

The old man backed up a step, only to whimper in fear as the ninja followed him. "Zabuza... Zabuza... can't we work somethin' out?! I'll pay you! I'll double what I promised you before! Anything you want! Name it!"

"Anything?" Gatou nodded, but before he could speak, Zabuza drove his kunai into his heart. The surrounding henchman gasped. The old man's face whitened in shock and pain. Zabuza laughed darkly. "I've been wanting to do that ever since I met you."

The tycoon gurgled and dropped to the ground.

For a few moments there was only silence.

"Oi, Kakashi," The Leaf Jounin looked up at him, his expression blank. "Our quarrel is finished. You're free to do as you please."

The mist nin's eyes fell on the body of his subordinate's briefly, and the Copy Ninja nodded and pulled down his hitai-ate. "I understand,"

The surrounding thugs milled around their employer's corpse helplessly a few moments before turning their attention back to the two ninja.

"What? You think this is over?" one yelled. "You just killed the guy who pays us!"

Zabuza snorted, turned and began to walk away.

"Don't you turn away from us!" a chain-wielding thug screamed. "You think you're just gonna get away with what you've done!"

Kakashi tensed himself for their retaliation, only to freeze at the second rush of demonic energy sweeping over the bridge. He turned towards the small blonde slowly walking towards them, her eyes glowing an eerie red.

She took in the sight of the henchmen, scowling with disdain. "And you think you have what it takes to stop me?"

True to her words, those that remained of Gatou's henchman turned and fled.

'Well, that solves one problem...' Kakashi thought.
Naruto whipped her head around towards Zabuza, who was slowly limping his way towards Haku's body. "Stay away from him!" she snarled.

"Naruto, wait!" Kakashi moved to block her, but she hissed at him as well, causing him to step back in surprise. The fury in her eyes was so deep, but the other emotion - sharp grief present in her glowing gaze really put the battle hardened Jounin on edge. The type of despair present in her eyes was so poignant, so painful... he knew it could have come from only one thing - the deep-felt loss of someone close to you. Kakashi knew that feeling all too well.

He gazed at the still mist-ninja laying on the cold ground and the short-handled kunai visible in the front of his robes. He recalled the blonde's happiness as she spoke of her mystery friend. 'So Haku *was* her mystery friend...' He paused, a knot forming in his stomach. "But what happened to Sasuke?"

His thoughts were cut off by a yowl of outrage. His eye shot upward at the sight of the blonde slowly advancing towards the two Kirigakure ninja, murder in her eyes.

"How dare you! How dare you go to him after how you treated him!" Her body trembled in rage as she stared down the larger mist nin, blocking his path. "He died because of you! All because he felt some sick need to please you! He would have done anything for you! Anything at all! And you didn't eve--" She paused as he stepped around her and knelt down, cradling the younger boy's body in his battered arms.

"Reign in your wildcat, Kakashi," the mist ninja muttered. "She talks too damn much..."

Kakashi cringed. 'Yeah... how about we not antagonize the youki-charged kunoichi...?'

Zabuza closed his eyes. "At least let this wicked man die in peace..."

"You're dying...?" That brought Naruto up short, forcing her to take in the extent of his injuries. How he had managed to stay standing before now was a wonder in itself. Slowly, the anger raging within her began to recede.

"I can't follow to wherever it is he's gone to..." Naruto watched as his larger hand brushed the stray hair out of the younger boy's face. "But at least I can share this last moment with him..."

Eyes still tinged with demonic aura widened in astonishment. "You did care about him..."

Zabuza let out a huff, never taking his eyes off the boy in his arms. "The bloodline he carried within him was feared in his homeland along with all those who possessed it." he explained.

"Those that had it strove to keep it a secret, fearful of being discovered. Haku's mother carried the gene and passed it on to him... she was murdered right before his eyes... by his own father." Both Naruto and Kakashi started in surprise. There was bitterness in the mist ninja's words as he continued, "Despite the life he had lived, the boy was still so kind... his heart was too soft... but he vowed to become my tool, to do whatever I asked of him. He became a ninja, a killer who carried out my will... even when his heart died a little every day."

Naruto stared at Haku's body, his face stilled by death, remembering all the words he had spoken to her.

~ "It is painful to lose someone precious to you... However, such is the life of the shinobi..." ~

~ "I have to protect my master's dream... I am his tool..." ~

~ "I vowed that I would do whatever I could to repay him... He was my one and only precious..." ~
"Haku..." The last vestiges of youki faded from her chakra, and her eyes became a sorrowful electric blue.

"It was you..." Zabuza stared at her, causing her to flinch guiltily. Her eyes went to the kunai imbedded hilt deep just beneath his rib cage. Kakashi followed her gaze, his eye softening in understanding. "Something in him had changed...I noticed it not too long ago... He was... happy..." He paused, staring at the peaceful smile on the boy's face. "I've never seen such a look on him before... you put it there, didn't you?"

She looked away, her hands clenched tightly at her sides. "I thought..." She remembered his smile and the peace she had felt in his company. She also remembered the kiss; no one had ever given her one like it before... He'd been so gentle with her; it was almost as if he really... She tensed, closing her eyes painfully. "He and I were so much alike... I wanted us to be friends..."

"Friends, huh..." Zabuza snorted, but there was hardly any spite behind it. His eyes were slowly drooping. "He probably would've liked that."

"You were his friend," Naruto stared down the missing nin, daring him to deny it. He didn't say a word. "You were his most precious person... That's how I know," She paused, her eyes watering briefly before she spoke again. "That's how I know you two'll find each other again..."

Letting out a sigh, Zabuza slowly closed his eyes.

He didn't open them again.

oooo

After much prodding and encouragement from Tazuna, Sakura lead them through the rapidly diminishing mist in search of her comrades. She could tell the fight had been terrifying judging by the amount of damage done to the bridge. She was about to apologize for setting back the old bridge builder's work schedule, but her words died in her throat at the sight that lay before her.

Tears brimmed her green eyes as they widened in shock. "SASUKE-KUN!!"

Hearing her cry, Kakashi and Naruto rushed in her direction. Upon nearing her, they found her kneeling on the ground over Sasuke's body, trembling slightly. Tazuna stood helplessly off to the side.

Kakashi stilled, clenching his fists at his sides. 'Was I too late again...?'

Naruto ventured closer to Sakura, her hands fist into the material of her jacket. "Sakura..." She paused, trying to keep her voice from breaking. She tried not too look at the body in her arms. "I'm... I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry I broke my promise..."

Sakura paused, sitting up to turn back at look at her. "Huh...?" Her eyes were red from crying.

"I let you down..." Naruto looked down, biting her lip hard. "I wasn't able to protect him... I--"

A tired voice from Sakura's lap broke off the rest of her words. "Who said... I needed your protection... mo-ron...?"

There were a few seconds of silence.
Naruto's eyes widened and she ran over to the other side of Sakura to stare at the dark haired boy giving her a half-hearted surly glare. "You mean... you're alive?!"

Sasuke only snorted, as if to say 'Duh!'.

Kakashi let out a relieved chuckle.

Smiling up at the blonde, Sakura nodded before explaining. "It was just like it was with Zabuza before," she said. "That other ninja only pretended to hit the vitals... instead he hit certain pressure points to make it seem like he had killed Sasuke-kun."

The blood slowly drained from Naruto's face.

Frowning in confusion, Sasuke started to sit up only to be gently pushed back by Sakura. Too drained to argue, he stayed where he was. It wasn't as if he was comfortable where he was or anything... He stared at the stricken look on the blonde's face. "What happened to him?" he asked, his frown deepening when her expression only seemed to worsen. His eyes darkened. "He's dead isn't he?"

Sakura let out a quiet gasp when Naruto only nodded.

"So..." Tazuna said gruffly. "What now...?"

"Heeeey, you guys!"

Everyone started in surprise, taking in the spectacle approaching them. All the people from the village, lead by Inari and his mother, made their way towards them. They were all armed with pots, pans, pitchforks, anything one could use as a weapon. It looked as though they had been prepared to battle as well.

"Inari...," Tazuna stared in awe, taking note of the collander the boy donned on his head as a helmet. "What're you doing here?"

"Whaddya mean?" He held up the crossbow he'd been toting along with him. Just where the heck had he gotten that from?! "We all came to help! It's our village these guys are fighting for after all!" Several villagers chorused in agreement.

"Inari..." There was pride in the old bridge builder's voice.

Tsunami smiled, but then paused to survey the area. "Um, what happened?"

"Well..." Kakashi rubbed the back of his head absently. "The fight's already over."

"Whaaaa? You mean we missed it?" A pout formed on Inari's face. "But the hero's s'posed to show up just in the nick of time to save the da--- uh?"

Naruto walked towards him, enveloping the smaller boy in a light hug. "You did, Inari-kun," she murmured. "Just in the nick of time..." She grinned softly at the boy's flustered expression before everything faded to black.

"Naruto...? NARUTO!"

oooo

She couldn't see. She was surrounding in darkness once again.
"I killed him..." Memories of the fight flashed in her mind. "I killed Haku..."

~ HE ATTACKED YOU... TRIED TO TAKE AWAY WHAT IS YOURS... HE WAS AN ENEMY ~

Naruto closed her eyes and shook her head. "No..." She remembered Haku's kind smile. "He was a friend..."

oooo

"Okay, bend your arm once more like that... then that way..." Sakura studied his arm with a critical eye. "Any pain... any pinched nerves...?"

"No, Sakura... I told you, I'm fine..." Sasuke tried to keep the pink tint from his cheeks at all Sakura's mother-henning. Though a small part of him liked the attention she was giving him so long as it wasn't fanatical. 'Not like she'll ever hear that from me, of course...'

Giving him a studying look, Sakura decided she believed him and stood up, brushing imaginary dust from her hands. "All right then, I guess I'll leave you alone then." Sasuke rolled his eyes and set about removing the bandages adorning his arms and legs. "But if you feel any sort of discomfort, you let me know okay?" The only reply she received was a grunt.

Head buried deep within his beloved porn novel, Kakashi fought hard not to laugh. And people wondered why he hated hospitals...

"Well, now that's Sasuke-kun's done, let's have a look at Naru--" Sakura paused, looking around for her female teammate. A pointed finger from behind a little orange book directed her gaze towards the window. There the blonde sat perched outside on the ledge, blue eyes gazing out at the water. Sakura's eyes darkened in worry. She'd been like that ever since regaining consciousness. "Is she all right? She's been like that for days now... What happened?"

Kakashi paused, glancing up from his book. "She's probably trying to come to grips with what happened on the bridge."

"With that boy... Haku?" Sakura asked.

He nodded. "I think he was the boy she befriended earlier... only to have to face each other in combat..."

"So..." Sasuke glanced at the blonde in the window. "Naruto killed Haku?"

The jounin didn't answer at first, remembering the kunai just below the damage wraught by his Chidori. 'If he hadn't stepped in to save Zabuza that, along with all his other injuries probably would have done him in...? He closed his eye. 'You realize that, too, don't you, Naru...?'

Realizing the answer for himself, the Uchiha frowned.

oooo

After staying a few more days to recuperate, the time finally came for Team 7 to return to Konoha. All of the villagers met them at the bridge to wish them well, thanking them for all their assistance.

"Even though you wrecked half of it tryin' to save it," Tazuna joked with a smirk. "We wouldn't even be alive probably if it weren't for you all... so thank you. Thank you so much."
"We were happy to help," Kakashi said with an eye grin. "Although next time, leave the deception to us ninjas."

The old man laughed out loud before turning to the blonde of their group. His expression softened a moment before morphing into a haughty smirk. "I guess I was wrong about you Leaf Ninja... you're a helluva lot tougher than I thought..." He reached over and ruffled her hair, causing her to gawk in surprise. "Specially you, Blondie..."

"Of course I am, ya old geezer!" she exclaimed, "I'm gonna be Hokage someday, after all!"

Beside her, Kakashi smiled, hearing some of her old spirit in her tone. 'It's good to see she's doing better...' he thought to himself. 'I guess, all she needs is just a little time...'

Tsunami smiled at the pair's antics before glancing down at her son. She gave him an encouraging nudge. "Go on, honey..."

Flustered and embarrassed, he shuffled forward until he was in front of Naruto. The blonde paused and blinked down at him. "You'll come back, won't you?" he muttered. "We're... gonna miss you."

She was silent a few moments before a sunny grin broke across her face. "Course I will! An' I'll be even tougher than I am now! Believe it!" She gave him a thumbs up. "You'll hafta look after the place 'til then, though. Can ya do that, Inari-kun?"

He laughed and nodded. "You bet, Naru-niichan!"

"Nee-chan." He and several of the other villagers blinked in confusion. Naruto's grin widened. "I'm a girl!" She gave them all a jaunty way as she and her teammates began their trek across the bridge.

Watching them go, Inari's face rivaled that of a tomato.

As they walked away, Sakura groaned. "You get some sorta sick thrill outta doin' that, don't you?"

Naruto blinked innocently. "What do you mean, Sakura-chan?"

Kakashi grinned and Sasuke grunted.

"The Bridge of Dreams!"

"Too corny."

"The Bridge Where Titans clashed and Dreams were born!"

"Too long!"

"Well, it's gotta have a name!"

"The Great Uzumaki Bridge." Everyone turned back to Tazuna. "For the girl who came in like a
whirlwind and set everything right again." He grinned. "That way, everyone will remember that this was her first step towards becoming something great."

Tsunami nodded, resting a hand on her father's arm. "It's perfect." Inari nodded in agreement.

The old builder nodded his head thoughtfully. The Great Uzumaki Bridge, it was. "Hokage she says..." He chuckled. "Hell, who knows, she just might do it!"

oooo

Meanwhile...

"Achoo!"

"Watch where you sneeze, moron."

"Shut up, asshole! Somebody must be talkin' 'bout me!"

"Hn... who'd waste their breath talking about you?"

"You wanna say that to my face?"

"Naruto! Stop bothering Sasuke-kun!"

Kakashi sighed, burying his head into his porn. It was going to be a loooong trip.

End Chapter 6b

Chapter End Notes

Okay, now I'm really done for the night.

To bed!
Chapter 7: Together

Chapter Summary

Team 7 made it out of Wave in one piece, but do they have what it takes to be a real team? The time has come for them to put it to the test...

Chapter 7

To say the Hokage had been surprised to learn how Team 7's mission had turned out would be an understatement. After all, how often was it that a simple C Rank mission got so rapidly out of hand. One Jounin and three rookie Genin going up against Kirigakure nukenin and an entire criminal organization? It was unheard of! Kakashi had been quick to reassure him that his students had handled themselves well, going above and beyond the call of duty to successfully complete the mission. The old ninja had been pleased, if not still a little concerned, but as a reward for their success he reassigned the mission A rank status and pay. All's well that end's well, right?

Umino Iruka had been disinclined to agree. In fact, once learning of the ordeal his ex-students had been forced to undertake, Naruto especially, the Chunin Instructor had threatened to burn his porn collection if he ever put his students in such a situation again. This led the one-eyed Jounin to believe that the scarred ninja remained a Chunin by choice; the killing intent he had put into his declaration had been quite impressive.

'Heh... Geez, what a Mother Hen...'

There was nothing to be done about it now, really. Everyone was home safe and sound. 'Although... given that they managed to perform so well under the circumstances,' The jounin glanced skyward, noting the messenger hawk that was slowly circling overhead. The Hokage was calling a meeting at the tower. Beneath his mask, Kakashi grinned. 'Maybe it's time I upped the ante...'

Turning in the opposite direction of the Hokage Tower, the droopy-eyed ninja went off in search of his students. He could kill a few hours spying on them before reporting in. 'After all, what kind of sensei would I be if my students didn't come first?'

Icha Icha in hand, he vanished in a swirl of leaves.

oooo

Sakura walked through the village in a fog, her mind recounting the events of their past mission in Nami no Kuni. They'd come so close to dying, and yet some how they managed to come out of it on top. 'Well... for the most part anyway...'

The pink-haired kunoichi remembered the funk her blonde haired teammate had seemed to fall into after the debacle at the bridge. After learning that the ninja she had faced - the boy she had defeated in combat - was the boy she had befriended in the forest earlier, the blonde had been silent and withdrawn. Even after the team had moderately recovered enough rom their ordeal to travel, she'd still managed to keep herself separate from the others until their departure from.
Her green eyes darkened when her thoughts shifted to her fellow kunoichi. The blonde had been the Dead Last of their graduating class, and yet she'd displayed such amazing skill. She'd always behaved so obnoxiously, so carefree, and yet she'd been so heartbroken after their fight. Of course, she seemed to be doing much better now, but it had Sakura wondering...

"Which is the real you..." Sakura wondered aloud. "...Naruto?"

"Huh, Sakura-chan?"

The pink haired kunoichi tensed, whirling around to find the subject of her thoughts standing behind her with a curious expression on her face. She blushed in embarrassment. "Naruto...?"

The blonde cocked her head to the side, studying her. "What's with the face?" she asked. "What're you thinking about?"

"You." Blue eyes blinked in surprise. "Are you all right...? You know... after everything..."

"I talked to Iruka-sensei," the blonde explained, smiling faintly. "So I feel a lot better now..."

Sakura paused, looking down. "You could have tried talking to us you know," The blonde blinked again. "We're teammates after all."

"I know that, Sakura-chan..."

"Do you?" She stared at her intensely. "Ever since we found out your secret," The blonde tensed for a brief moment before her face went carefully blank. "It's like you can't decide how to act around us! One minute you're all serious and then the next you're acting like a goofball again! Why can't you be real around us?"

Naruto sighed, shoving her hands into her jacket pockets. "Do you really want me to be, Sakura-chan?" she asked. "It seems like you guys get along with the goofball Dobe better... Well... Sasuke does anyway..."

The Haruno girl frowned. "But Naruto..." she paused, sighing heavily. "I can't really speak for Sasuke-kun, but for me... it's confusing, y'know? One minute you're bouncing around pestering me about ramen dates and then the next thing I know, you're telling us you're a girl..."

The blonde blinked a little bit before laughing out loud. "*That's* what's bothering you?"

Sakura frowned. "Well, how would you feel if you found out another girl had a crush on you?"

"A crush?" The blonde scratched her head, consternation visible on her whiskered face. "You thought I had a crush on you?"

"You call me Sakura-chan and ask me to hang out with you..."

"Well, that's cuz I like you!" Naruto grinned.

"But I like Sasuke-kun!" Sakura exclaimed.
Her grin widened, turning mischievous. "Well, nobody's perfect." She quailed under the 'Glare of Doom' being turned her way before deciding it was in her best interest to explain herself further. "Look, Sakura-chan, all I really wanted was to be your friend."

Sakura lowered her clenched fists, blinking in surprise. "Really?" The blonde nodded. "Why?"

"Why not? You're really smart and really nice... most of the time."

'Most of the time...?'

The blonde was still going. "Besides, you've always been kinda my role model."

"Really?" Naruto nodded, and Sakura felt a stab of guilt.

The blonde remained oblivious. "And since we're teammates, it only makes more sense right?"

Sakura nodded in uncertainty. Grinning, the blonde leaned forward conspiratorially. "Besides, it's not like we're fighting over that bastard or anything."

Sakura bopped her over the head half-heartedly, earning a laugh from the blonde. "Don't call him that..."

"I'll stop calling him a bastard when he stops calling me a moron," Naruto sniffed. "In any case, I gotta get going." She grinned at her fellow kunoichi once again. "But think about what I said, 'kay?" The pink haired kunoichi nodded absentely. Her grin widening, Naruto turned and ran off, waving over her shoulder. "See ya later, Sakura-chan!"

Sakura remained silent, their conversation rattling around in her brain along with all the other thoughts concerning the blonde. 'Friends...' She watched as the blonde vanished into the crowd. 'With Naruto...'

~ "Besides, you've always been kinda my role model." ~

Naruto looked up to her? Even when it was her that had displayed so much strength and skill?

'Maybe it's me who should be looking up to you...' she thought to herself. 'After all, you're the one who managed to get a kiss from Sasuke-kun...' She paused, her words catching up to her.

"NARUTOOOOOO!"

Oblivious to her teammate's consteration, Naruto continued down the street. She ignored the stares and glares directed her way as usual, an absent-minded fox grin on her face. She couldn't let the people bother her now, after all. She had promised to protect everyone, so she had to get stronger.

'I'm gonna see my dream through all the way to the end,' she promised herself. 'Just you watch me, Haku...'

"BOOSSSSSSS!"

Naruto's thoughts were derailed as a small warm weight settled itself on her back, tiny arms wrapping themselves around her neck. She tensed at first, but after recognizing the presence, turned an annoyed eye to her passenger. "Ko-no-ha-ma-ruuuu!" The small boy grinned at her, and she
resisted the urge to groan. Ever since she'd first encountered him at the Hokage Tower when she became a Genin, the boy had declared her his rival. He hadn't left her alone since.

Another small child, a red headed girl named with rosy cheeks grasped her arm in a hug. "We missed you, Boss!" she squealed.

"Yeah!" a third child with glasses and an asthma problem, grasped her other hand.

'Ah, Moegi and Udon, too...' All three of them made of the Konohamaru Corps and together they were determined to make the poor girl's life more of a hassle than it already was. It was too bad she couldn't beat them up like she knew they deserved - they were kind of cute.

Konohamaru, from his position on her back, grinned mischievously. "How was your mission, Boss? A success right?"

She didn't answer immediately, remembering Haku's face once more.

As if sensing her distress, Udon looked up at her. "What's the matter, Boss?" he snuffled.

Shaking her head, she forced a rueful grin to her face. Mock-glaring at the boy on her back she replied, "You're heavy, that's what!" Konohamaru stuck out his tongue. "Don't you know better than to attack super cool ninja like me in the middle of the street?" She paused, feigning a look of superiority. "You could get mistaken for an enemy!"

The Hokage's grandson looked at her in awe before grinning. "That's my rival! Always on the alert!"

Moegi giggled, turning the blonde's attention to her. "We haven't seen you in weeks, Boss!" she exclaimed, giving her the Super Puppy-Dog Eyes. "Won't you play Ninja with us?"

Naruto's eye twitched slightly.

"We've been training while you were gone, Boss," Konohamaru exclaimed haughtily. "By now we're probably tough enough to defeat you!"

"Say what!" The blonde genin stopped and grabbed at the boy only to have him jump down and run off. "Get back here, brat!"

He blew a raspberry at her, laughing as he ran. "Can't catch me, Boss! Can't catch me-oof!"

Colliding with something hard, he lost his balance and fell to the ground with a thump.

An older boy dressed all in black from head to toe turned and glared at him. "Hey, watch where you're going!" he growled, his makeup covered face darkening in annoyance.

"Uh... sorry..." Konohamaru quailed, backing away slowly.

The boy in black reached for him, hauling him up by his scarf. "Too bad, kid... that ain't good enough...!"

A blonde girl strode up beside him, narrowing her eyes in distaste. "Kankurou," she said in a warning tone.
"What?" he said jeeringly. "I'm just gonna have a little fun with him!" She scoffed, looking away as if to say 'I'll have no part in this'.

"Konohamaru-kun!" Udon and Moegi called out, taking in the situation their leader had landed himself into.

Naruto stepped in front of them, staring down the black-garbed ninja with steely blue eyes. "Put him down!" she demanded.

'Kankurou' gave her a once over before snorting. "This ain't none of your business, kid." he said. "It's between me an' this brat here." He gave Konohamaru a little shake, causing him to whimper in fear.

"That brat's a friend of mine," Naruto insisted. "So I'm makin' it my business anyway."

Despite the danger he knew he was in, Konohamaru let out an exasperated moan. "Bosss...." he whined. "Do ya hafta insult me like that?!"

"Hush up, I'm trying to rescue you!"

"Rescue him?" Kankurou laughed out loud. "Psh... then who's gonna rescue you?" Reaching into his weapons' pouch, he swiftly drew a kunai in hand. Before he could make a move however, his arm was suddenly pinned behind him by the small blonde, his own kunai lightly piercing the base of his neck.

The other blonde girl beside him, his older sister and teammate Temari, tensed in surprise. "What...?"

"Holy crap!" Kankurou exclaimed.

Despite their height difference, Naruto kept her grip. Out of the corner of his eye Kankurou could see the seriousness of her gaze. "Let go of him..." she hissed. "I doubt the Hokage's grandson appreciates being roughed up by the likes of you."

'The Hokage's grandson...?\' Temari narrowed her eyes at her brother. "Do as he says, Kankurou," she snapped.

The boy relented, loosening his grip so that Konohamaru dropped to the ground with an unceremonious thump. Once the boy scrambled away to safety, Naruto released her grip on his arm. Smirking, Kankurou moved to turn his kunai on her only to have it knocked out of his hand with a small rock. "Ow! What the--!" He glanced around, glaring in anger. "Who threw that!"

Naruto looked around, her eyes landing on her male teammate perched in a nearby tree. He glanced at her briefly before turning his gaze back to Kankurou once more. Another rock was tossed loftily up and down in his hand. "You assault the Hokage's grandson and then threaten to attack one of this village's ninja," He paused, a smirk forming on his face. "For a foreign ninja, you sure aren't too smart..."

Temari gave him an appreciative look before turning to her fellow blonde. "You're teammates, eh? Lucky you."

Naruto just rolled her eyes.
Kankurou scowled. Just who did this punk kid think he was? "You think I'm scared of you?" He reached for the large bundle strapped to his back. "I'll show you just what I'm capable of."

Naruto and Sasuke tensed and brace themselves for the upcoming attack.

"Enough." Sasuke turned to the foreign voice, starting in surprise at the sudden presence of another ninja in the tree beside him. He stood upside down on an adjacent branch, short red hair and teal eyes contrasting against his pale skin. He didn't acknowledge Sasuke, keeping his cold glare on Kankurou below. "You're embarrassing us, Kankurou."

"G-gaara..." Both he and Temari quailed under his gaze, backing up a step.

Naruto studied them in confusion. 'They're afraid of him...?'

Sasuke's thoughts were along a similar vein. He studied the red ninja as he vanished from the tree in a swirl of sand, rematerializing on the ground. Like the other two, he carried a large object on his back... a gourd of some sorts. Were they teammates? Despite being the smallest of the three, he certainly looked to be the strongest. 'This kid... I didn't even sense his presence... Just who is he?'

Kankurou stared at Gaara, holding his hands up in surrender under his cold stare. "Sorry, Gaara... I was just messing around..."

Gaara's face remained impassive. "If you attack that girl again," His voice was so soft, yet deadly. "I will not hesitate to kill you."

Both he and Temari reacted as if struck.

From his position beside Moegi and Udon, Konohamaru let out a gasp of outrage. "Hey, I'm not a girl--!"

Naruto bopped him on the head. "Shut it, Konohamaru!"

Jumping down from his perch, Sasuke glared at the three foreign ninja. Their hitai-ate displayed the shape of an hourglass - they were from Suna? "Hey," All three ninja turned. "Who are you?"

"Who me?" Temari questioned, blushing lightly.

"No, him with the gourd," Her face fell slightly.

The redhead turned halfway, studying his profile. "Sabaku no Gaara." he answered. "And you?"

This guy was definitely strong. Sasuke smirked. "Uchiha Sasuke."

"And he's Uzumaki Naruto!" Konohamaru exclaimed, pointing at the blonde beside him. He earned another bop on the head.

"Shut UP, Konohamaru!"

Luckily, their antics were ignored by the two ninja currently staring each other down. "What's your business here in Konohagakure?" Sasuke questioned. "You're not allowed here without express permission."
Gaara didn't respond.

"We have permission," Temari smirked, drawing out their passport papers. "We're legit - we're here to participate in the Chunin Exams."

"Chunin exams?"

"You mean you don't know about them?" The Suna kunoichi's smirk widened. "Your village is hosting it, y'know."

Sasuke's expression turned thoughtful. 'Is that so...

oooo

Sarutobi glanced at the window before turning his attention back to the jounin assembled in the room. "I imagine shinobi from the various Ninja villages participating in the Exams have already begun to arrive,"

"That's correct, Hokage-sama," an administrative chunin answered. "Their accomadations are being seen to as we speak."

"Excellent," the Sandaime nodded. "It is at this time I would like those Jounin who wish to nominate their students to participate to please step forward."

Several Jounin did so, among them Yuuhi Kurenai, Sarutobi Asuma, and... Hatake Kakashi.

There were murmurs from all the other ninja present in the room at the turn of events. All three Rookie teams? It was unheard of!

The Sandaime only smiled thoughtfully.

oooo

As the Sand ninja took their leave, Udon let out a sigh of relief. "Wow, that was really close!"

Moegi nodded in agreement, drawing Konohamaru into a tight hug. "Those guys were really scary!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad you weren't hurt!"

Naruto grinned at the flushed expression on Konohamaru's face before scowling at Sasuke. "What's your deal? Jumping in here and bein' all hero-y?" Sasuke rolled his eyes. "I could've handled them myself, y'know!"

The Uchiha studied her a few moments in silence. The blonde had risked her life for him, killing someone she considered a friend in order to avenge what she'd believed to be his death. No one had ever done that for him, and he certainly hadn't expected it from the likes of her.

Those who abandoned their teammates were worse than trash, Kakashi had said.

~ "Teammates look after each other,"~ That had been Sakura. ~ "If it’s not too much a bother, you can let me look after you, too…” ~
"I told you I don't abandon my teammates! And certainly not my friends! So just shut up cuz you're stuck with me!"

He wasn't about to tell her his true reasons for tailing her. After all, what would it do for his reputation if he'd admitted to actually being worried about her? So instead, he scoffed and rolled his eyes, earning the predicted growl of annoyance from her. "Whatever," he said, turning away. "Now we're even."

"Huh?" Naruto blinked, watching him walk away. 'What's he talkin' about?'

Sakura approached the bridge that was Team 7's usual meeting spot, pausing at the tense atmosphere that awaited her. Her teammates sat on opposite railings, doing everything in their power to avoid making any sort of eye contact. Sakura fought the urge to pull at her hair in frustration. She'd seemed to be making headway with the two of them separately, but together...? Would they ever learn to get along? For show, she folded her arms, giving Naruto an accusing look. "What'd you do now?"

The blonde looked surprised, but then grinned when she caught the teasing tone in her voice. "Nothing, Sakura-chan!"

Kakashi chose that time to appear in a puff of smoke, his arm raised in the usual jaunty wave. "Yo!"

"You're late, Sensei!" Naruto and Sakura chorused.

The Jounin's visible eye creased into a grin. "Ah well, you see, an earthquake hit and I had to avoid all the cracks in the street so that I didn't break my back."

Sasuke snorted.

"LIAR!" Sakura accused, her face red in embarrassment. *THAT'S NOT EVEN HOW THAT SAYING GOES! SHAAAA!*

Naruto laughed, bounding up the the jounin with eager eyes. "We got any missions today, Kakashi-sensei?"

"Nope." Before the blonde could protest, he handed each of his students a small pamphlet. "I just need you each to fill out these,"

Sakura studied the paper in her hands, her eyes widening in recognition. "But Sensei, this is..."

"That's right," Kakashi said. "I've nominated each of you for the Chunin Exam."

"Really!" Naruto exclaimed. He nodded. "All right!"

Even Sasuke looked pleased.

"B-but, Sensei..." Sakura's expression was troubled. "We're only Rookies... we haven't even been genin that long..."
"And yet you've proven that you have what it takes to advance to the next level," Kakashi replied. "The exam begins in one week's time. You have until then to decide." He paused and gave them each a measuring look. "If you're willing to give it a go, bring yourselves along with that form to room 301 of the Administrative building." He hopped up onto the bridge railing, giving them all a little wave. "Well then, see ya later!" He vanished in a poof of smoke.

Sasuke was all-out smirking now.

"Too cool!" Naruto did a little dance. "You hear that, Sakura-chan? We're gonna get to take the Exam! Woohoo!"

Sakura laughed uneasily, keeping her eyes on the form in her hands the whole while.

oooo

Umino Iruka was not a happy chunin. He stared down the Hokage, his displeasure quite plain on his face. "You cannot possibly allow this, Hokage-sama!"

The old man remained unphased. "Why not?" he asked. "Each team has met the neccessary requirements."

"But they're much too young!" Iruka argued. "All nine of them are barely out of the Academy!"

Sandaime nodded. "It is a bit unprecedented, I admit... but each Jounin instructor feels that their students are capable of handling the challenge." He smirked lightly. "I can't recall the last time something like this has happened."

"With all due respect, this isn't a laughing matter, Sandaime-sama!" Iruka exclaimed, his face pinched in worry. "The Chunin Exams can be dangerous! It's too early to be exposing them to something like this - Team 7 especially what with their last mission."

"On the contrary, Iruka," Sarutobi paused, and lit his pipe. "Team 7's experience in Nami gives them an advantage over their fellow rookies... I daresay they may be the best suited for this challenge."

Realizing he wasn't going to be able to sway the old man, Iruka sighed and lowered his head in resignation. "I hope so, sir," he said. "I really do hope so..."

oooo

Sakura sat on her bed, knees hugged closely to her chest. The exam registration form sat propped up on her pillow, blank and foreboding. Kakashi's words echoed over and over in her head.

~ "...you've proven that you have what it takes to advance to the next level..." ~

Feelings of insecurity and inadequacy washed over her once more. It was true that they'd faced chunin and jounin in Wave, but it had been Naruto and Sasuke who had done much of the fighting. All she'd done was guard Tazuna. She closed her eyes, sighing heavily. 'I know Sasuke-kun can make it... he's so strong and cool... and Naruto has what it takes to do it, too, I'm sure... but me...?' She hugged her knees tighter. 'I'll be left behind...'

"What am I supposed to do?" She stared at the pamphlet, as if expecting it to answer her. Of
course, it didn't respond. It remained where it was, almost mocking her. Who could she go to? Certainly not her parents or her sensei. There was only one person she could think of really...

Sakura rose from her seat, climbing out of her open window. She only hoped she remembered where she lived...

oooo

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Naruto, sleepy eyed and disoriented, opened her door slowly. "H'lo...?"

A subdued pink haired kunoichi stood at her doorstep. "Hi... Naruto..."

It took several moments for the bed-headed blonde to realize it was Sakura standing on her doorstep, but when she did she blinked in honest surprise. "Sakura-chan? What're you...?"

Sakura flushed, staring at her feet. "Can I... come in?"

The blonde blinked, stepping aside. "Uh, sure..."

Nodding her gratitude, her teammate entered the apartment. Sakura had never been to Naruto's home before, she realized as she studied her surroundings. She knew the layout of Sasuke's apartment by heart - most of his fangirls did - but she was surprised to find that Naruto's looked nothing like she expected it to. It was small and sparsely furnished. There were a few spare tools and open scrolls lying out on a low coffee table in the main sitting area, but surprisingly enough the blonde kept it very neat. Not what she had expected at all.

Naruto grinned uneasily as Sakura awed at the number of potted plants positioned around the room. "I like plants," she confessed. "They're pretty easy to take care of, and the place isn't so empty looking with them here..."

Sakura nodded silently.

The blonde paused, scratching her head. "Um, would you like anything?" she asked. "I've got tea, I think... Iruka-sensei gave it to me..." Sakura nodded, and for a time there was nothing but the sound of water slowly boiling on the stove. Naruto came back over, studying her teammate carefully. "Is there something the matter, Sakura-chan?" she asked gently. "You couldn't sleep?"

"I was thinking about the Chunin Exam..." Sakura admitted. She stared down at her hands. "I... I don't think I'm going to enter."

Naruto blinked in surprise, "Why not?"

Forcing a smile to her face, Sakura met the disbelieving stare of her teammate. "I'm not strong enough..." she explained. "I couldn't help you or Sasuke-kun against Haku..."

"You helped Tazuna-jiji," the blonde protested. "It wouldn't have mattered one bit if we won if something had happened to him. It all would've been for nothing..."

"That's true..."
The kettle whistled and Naruto stepped away to prepare their tea. Setting two cups down at the table where they sat, she poured their tea before staring back at Sakura earnestly. "You shouldn't hafta worry about being on the frontlines, Sakura-chan," she said. "You're still important to the team, no matter what."

Tea cup halfway to her lips, Sakura stared at her in surprise. "How's that?"

She grinned as if the answer were obvious. "You're the brains behind our operation!" Naruto answered. "With Sasuke as the skill and me as the strength, the three of us make up one complete ninja!"

Sakura laughed despite herself. "You're silly," Naruto joined her in her laughter. "But you're pretty smart, too..." Her eyes fell on a book that rested on the table beside her. She picked it up, throwing Naruto a knowing glance. "Dynamics of Warm Climate Botany... Naruto-kun... who knew you were such a nerd?"

"I am not!" The blonde flushed in embarrassment, making a weak grab for the book held out of her grasp. "Give that back!"

"Ah, ah, ah! Can't get it! Can't get it!"

"Moouuuuu, you're so mean, Neechan!" Sakura froze, causing her to blink in surprise. "Eh?"

Her teammate was staring at the ground again, the earlier jubilance gone. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I am mean, aren't I...?"

Naruto blinked. "No, you were just teasing..."

"But I've been terrible to you before..." Sakura stared up at her, eyes watering. "And yet you still want to be my friend...?"

The blonde blinked before smiling once more. "Of course. Sakura-nee-chan's my role model." She remembered that day so many years ago... 'It was cuz of you that I decided to become Hokage after all...'

Wiping away the tears that had threatened to fall, Sakura smiled at the blonde. She still didn't understand her at all. 'But I'll try... I swear I'll try...' "Then from now on," The blonde gave her a questioning look. "Uzumaki Naru is going to be my rolemodel. I'll focus on becoming stronger, so that we'll all be able to pass the Chunin Exams together!"

"Right!" Naruto nodded and pumped her fist in excitement. "Those other ninja better look out 'cuz Konohagakure's Team 7 is taking no prisoners!"

Sakura nodded, a gentle smile coming to her face as her worry slowly faded away under the assuredness of the blonde's own grin. 'Thank you... Naruto-kun...'

oooo

Kakashi looked up at the sight of his students approaching the Administrative building. Closing his book with an audible snap, he pushed himself off of the wall to meet them.

"So all three of you showed," he murmured once they were all within earshot. "Good."
Naruto studied him with a puzzled look. "Whaddya mean, Sensei?"

"I let you all decided individually if you wanted to take the exam," the Jounin explained. "But had one of you decided not to show, the other two would have been barred from participating."

Sasuke balked. "What?"

"So you're saying all three of us had to go or not at all?" Naruto asked. Kakashi nodded. "Mou... what a sneaky trick, Sensei!"

He grinned. 'I had to do it... I didn't want her to feel pressured into coming if she didn't feel she was ready...'

The subject of his thoughts only laughed, grasping both of her teammates by the arm. "Come on! If we don't hurry, we're gonna be late!"

Sasuke stared at their joined hands, unable to hide his blush as he was pulled towards the building. "Sa-Sakura..."

Naruto let herself be led without any objections, turning back to wave at their sensei as they went. "Bai bai, Kakashi-sensei!" she exclaimed.

"Good luck!" he called out, watching as they vanished through the double doors.

'...And be careful...' 

End Chapter 7
Chapter 8: Strength

Chapter Summary

The Chuunin Exam begins.

Is Team 7 ready for the trials that await...?

Chapter 8

"This place is a total freakshow!" Sakura exclaimed in frustration as she and the other two members of Team 7 made their way through the halls of the Administrative building towards room 301.

Arms folded behind her head in a laidback stance, Naruto glanced at her sideways. "Whaddya mean, Sakura-neechan?"

"I mean," the pink-haired kunoichi said, paying no mind to new honorific the blonde had attached to her name. For some reason she found it to be a nice change. Regardless, she continued on with her tirade. "We've barely been in this place 15 minutes and we're already being tested! It's ridiculous!"

After leaving their sensei, the three genin had entered the building and traversed the stairs to their destination. They were derailed, however, by the group of participants huddled outside a door guarded by two older genin. Claiming they were weeding the weaklings out of the competition, they had even gone so far to attack anyone who tried to get past them.

"Aw, it wasn't so bad," said Naruto.

"Wasn't so bad?"

Sasuke had approached the two ninja, calling them out on the fact the door they guarded was not the examination room, but a genjutsu made to make everyone believe it was. Of course everything had gone downhill from there. The older genin had moved to attack her male teammate - who seemed all to happy to comply to his wishes - only to be stopped by the most peculiar ninja she had ever had the misfortune of coming across. He was dressed in a horrid green jumpsuit, a bizarre bowl hair cut complete with the thickest eyebrows she had ever seen. And to make matters worse, he had hit on her! With Sasuke-kun right there!

Ignoring Sakura's inner-turmoil, Sasuke remained silent as he walked between the two kunoichi, his mind also on the events that had just occurred. He had known they had walked into a genjutsu by the way Sakura had tensed beside him. She'd always had an aptitude for it in the Academy... not like he kept track of her or anything. However, he'd found it strange that Naruto hadn't seemed to notice anything amiss.
Was she weak against Genjutsu, he wondered. She'd never shown any aptitude for it in the Academy, nor anything else for that matter, and yet here they were now. Despite himself, he felt a sudden thrill at the thought of there being something at which the blonde didn't naturally excel. Realizing this brought a frown to his face; was he really that insecure? Did it take so little to make him feel better about himself?

He rid himself of the thought with a minute shake of his head. 'I'm an Avenger... all I need to concern myself with is getting stronger...' He cast a look at the blonde that went unnoticed. 'And once I do...'

Naruto suddenly stopped, staring up at the balcony above them that connected to the third floor.

"What's the matter?" Both Sakura and Sasuke followed her gaze, the former paling at the sight of the same green clad ninja sitting perched on the balcony railing.

Sasuke scowled at the other ninja. He remembered him jumping in to block the kick he had aimed at the older genin antagonizing everyone. He'd moved so quickly, blocking his blow with such ease. 'He'd been holding back... like Naruto..." "You again... what do you want?"

The other ninja nodded, studying them all closely. "You are the famous Team 7, correct?"

Naruto and Sakura blinked in unison. "Famous?"

"Who wants to know?" Sasuke asked.

The green clad ninja grinned, his teeth giving off a shiny 'ping!' as he jumped down from his perch with a flourish. "I am the Beautiful Green Beast of Konoha," he exclaimed, striking a pose. "Rock Lee!"

All three members of Team 7 stared at him in silence.

The first to recover, Naruto let out a small sound of recognition. "You're the guy from downstairs, ne? The one that broke up the fight between Sasuke and that other guy?"

Sasuke gave her a look as if to say, 'you forgot that already?'

Lee nodded. "That is correct."

Lee nodded. "That is correct." He turned to Sasuke, his expression eager. "I apologize for interrupting your fight. I wish to make it up by challenging you to a duel here and now."

He blinked before scowling once more. He didn't need any handouts, certainly not from this weirdo. "Save it for the actual exam." he bit out.

"I cannot," Lee insisted. "There is someone I wish to face here in these exams and I would like to test my skills against someone at a similar level... Who would be better than the last of the Uchiha clan and #1 rookie of this year's graduating class?" He paused and gave Sasuke a knowing grin. "You are him, are you not?"

His Sharingan activated and he shifted into a taijutsu stance. "You want me to prove it to you?"

The other ninja's grin widened. "Please do..."

"Sasuke-kun!"
The kunoichi’s voice seemed to spur the two males into action. The two of them rushed towards each other, legs raised to disable each other with powerful kick. Suddenly there was a flash of orange and then Naruto was between them, grabbing their feet to keep their blows from connecting.

Both Lee and Sasuke blinked in surprise.

The green clad ninja stared at Naruto in surprise. "You should not have been able to block that..." he awed.

Releasing them, Naruto rotated her shoulders with a rueful grin. "Well, it *was* kinda hard to do if that makes you feel any better..." She glanced at the orange leg-warmers covering his legs. 'Damn, his leg was heavy... is he...?'

"Naruto," Her dark haired teammate was scowling at her. She blinked in confusion; what was his problem now? "Get out of the way... this doesn't concern you."

She frowned right back at him. "Yeah, it does," she said. "If you two morons get caught fighting before the exam starts and get disqualified, so do me an' Sakura-neechaa--" She turned to their teammate only to find her fighting to maintain her sanity.

Lee was currently blowing air-kisses at her, causing her to nimbly avoid each heart-shaped symbol of love fired her way. Naruto thought she was doing quite well for one who seemed so unsure of her own abilities. The poor girl was ducking and weaving as if her life was at stake.

Sasuke was twitching slightly, his anger at Naruto momentarily forgotten. "Just who is this guy...?"

"Beats me..." Naruto answered, finding the pair's antics amusing.

"Please allow me the pleasure of a date, beloved angel," Lee wooed. "I promise to protect you 'til the day I die!" His teeth pinged for effect and he blew her yet another kiss.

"Noooo!" Sakura ducked down low, spinning out of its way as if it were a poison-tipped kunai. 'I could never date this guy!" 'That suit and those eyebrows... so creepy!"

"B-but, Sakura-san!" Lee began.

"Lee, there you are!" All four genin froze as another figure emerged on the balcony ledge. However, only Lee remained unphased when a ninja that looked remarkably like an older version of green-clad ninja, dropped down in front of them. Team 7's horror only increased when he reared back and decked the boy, sending him sliding across the room.

"Oi, what the hell was that for?!" Naruto exclaimed, only to gawk when Lee jumped back up as if nothing had happened.

The twin ninja remained oblivious. "Lee!" the older man exclaimed. "How could you abandon your teammates? Don't you realize that the exam is about to start!"

"I am sorry, Gai-sensei," Lee cried out. "I only wanted to scope out the competition!"

'So I'm the competition...?' Sasuke thought to himself. 'I wonder who else I have to look out for...'
"I understand your drive, Lee," His instructor, Gai, replied. "But it is only through teamwork and unity that one can achieve true victory!" He gave the boy a thumb's up.

"G-Gai-sensei..." Lee awed, his eyes watering.

"Lee..."

"Gai-sensei...!" Much to the other genin's horror, the two ninja embraced each other enthusiastically, a backdrop of waves crashing against the rocks appearing behind them.

"Wha... what the heck is this?" Sakura murmured, mortified.

Sasuke's face was a faint shade of green.

Gai released his student, turning to the members of Team 7. He studied them all closely. "Ah, so I take it you three are Team 7?" he asked. "Well, what do you know, Kakashi did take on a team after all."

"You know our sensei?" Sakura blinked.

"Know him? Why, he's only my esteemed Ever-Eternal Rival!"

"Rival?"

Gai grinned. "That's right! We've engaged each other numerous times in combat with the score currently standing at 50-51!"

"No way!" Sakura gaped.

"It *is* true!" Lee exclaimed. "Sensei does not lie!"

Amused by their antics, Naruto grinned and walked towards the two matching ninja. "You already know Sakura and Sasuke, so I guess I should introduce myself, too, ne?" Her grin widened. "I'm Naruto."

The Jounin instructor grinned in response. "It is a pleasure to meet you and your teammates, Naruto," he said. "I am the Beautiful Azure Beast of Konoha, Maito Gai!" For effect, he struck a strange little pose that was probably supposed to be dramatic, but only ended up looking... bizarre.

'Is this for real...?' Sasuke thought to himself, sizing up the older ninja with a faint look of distaste. 'Is this guy really as strong as Kakashi...?'

'He's a total weirdo...!' Sakura finished.

"In any case, you four need to run along," he cautioned. "The test is going to start soon. You don't want to be late."

Lee saluted. "Yes, Gai-sensei!"

"And, Lee...?"

"Yes, Gai-sensei?"
The Jounin gave him a thumbs up complete with blinding smile. "Good luck!"

"Yosh!" The boy returned it.

Sakura and Sasuke sported similar bland expressions. 'Weirdos...'

Watching as the two bounded away, Naruto merely folded her arms behind her head and laughed out loud. What kind of interesting people would she come across next?

"That was..." Sakura made a face, struggling for words. "Interesting..."

"Yeah," the blonde agreed, turning back to glance at her.

"Those eyebrows..." The pink haired kunoichi shuddered in remembrance. "They looked like furry, black caterpillars!"

Naruto blinked. "What's wrong with caterpillars?" she asked. "They eventually grow up to become butterflies."

Sakura had nothing to say to that.

"But in any case, we gotta be careful." The blonde's expression turned thoughtful. "Bushy-brow's sensei could'a disqualified us to give his team an advantage." She gave Sasuke a pointed look that he returned with a scowl.

"Only a proctor has the power to do that," Sakura argued. "At the very least he might have reported us."

"Whatever," Sasuke snorted. "I'm only here to fight strong opponents." The glare he directed at Naruto intensified. "Next time, don't get in my way. I can fight my battles on my own."

She frowned as he started to walk away. "Sasuke," He stopped, but didn't look back. "Being on a team means you don't hafta fight alone... don't you get that yet?"

~ "Teammates look after each other... If it's not too much a bother, you can let me look after you, too..." ~

~ "I told you I don't abandon my teammates! And certainly not my friends! So just shut up cuz you're stuck with me!" ~

For a long moment he didn't speak. "We may be teammates now," he said softly. "But eventually it's gonna be every man for himself..."

"Sasuke-kun...?" Sakura's eyes widened in confusion.

Her soft call went ignored. "You and I are gonna face each other at one point or another," He turned back to look at her, his eyes dark. "And when that time comes don't hold anything back."

Naruto stared at him speechless.

Sasuke turned away once more, walking towards the stairs that would lead them to their
destination. "C'mon, let's go."

Unsure of how to react, Sakura gave Naruto a look before following after him. Waiting a few seconds longer, the blonde let out a huff before jogging after them.

oooo

They stepped into the assigned room, feeling the eyes of everyone in the room fall upon them. Sakura felt slightly intimidated, but the presence of her teammates on either side of her bolstered her courage. She didn't back down under the hostility in those gazes, feeling for the briefest of moments that she could take on just about anything.

"No way! Forehead girl actually decided to show her abnormally large head!"

The pink-haired kunoichi tensed and then glared at the long-haired blonde that sneered at her before attaching herself to her teammate like a remora. "Sasuke-kuunn, you made it!"

"Get. Off."

"Hey, get your slimy hands off of Sasuke-kun, Ino-pig!!"

Naruto blinked, surprised to see that sort of hostility directed at someone else for a change. She recognized the other blonde draping herself over her teammate as Yamanaka Ino, one of the most skilled kunoichi in their graduating class. An image of a younger Ino comforting an equally young Sakura briefly came to mind. It completely contrasted against the malice and dislike the two girls currently displayed towards each other. 'But... aren't they supposed to be friends? Why are they so mad at each other...?'

A bored voice drew her from her thoughts. "Don't those two ever quit... So troublesome..."

She turned and grinned, recognizing the voice as belonging to none other than Nara Shikamaru. At his side, munching on a large bag of chips was his other teammate, Akimichi Chouji. "So, you guys are here, too?"

He frowned lightly, throwing a glance in the direction of the two squabbling girls. "Didn't have much say in the matter..." The blonde only laughed.

At the sight of the their familiar faces, Naruto's grin widened even further. Before becoming a genin, Naruto had spent many cut classes in the laidback boy's company, along with his childhood friend Akimichi Chouji. The two of them were still unaware that she was a girl, but despite that, Naruto had always considered them friends.

"Ah, don't sweat it, I'm sure you'll do fine..."

"That's rich, coming from a loser like you..." She turned to stare down the wild look ninja standing behind her, resisting the urge to growl in annoyance. The taller boy, dressed in a thick, fur-lined hood smirked down at her. "Don't know why you bother showing up, Uzumaki... Everybody knows you're never gonna make it past the first round."

"That a fact, Kiba?" Another old classmate of hers, Inuzuka Kiba, had always made it a mission to point out all of her shortcomings - despite the fact that they were a part of an act - for a reason she had yet to identify. Why bother trying to bully someone who wasn't intimidated by you? To
illustrate that fact, she turned her attention from him to the small white puppy tucked in the front of his hoody. A grin stole across her face as she gave the small animal a small pat on the head. "Hiya there, Akamaru! Doin' all right?"

The small dog yapped his amusement, leaning into the blonde's ministrations. Kiba was flabbergasted. "Akamaru!"

Naruto glanced back up at him, her grin turning slightly feral. "Say all ya like, Kiba," she said. "but I'm gonna make you eat those words."

"Keh... yeah right...!"

ooo

He was right there in front of her... so close that she could reach out and touch him if she wanted. She didn't dare of course - what would he say to her? How would he react? Standing behind her silent teammate, Aburame Shino, the even quieter Hyuuga Hinata wrung her hands together nervously, debating whether or not to approach the subject of her affections.

'What should I say to him...?' she wondered, not for the first time. 'Will he be happy to see me...?' There was a shifting of cloth and she looked up to see Shino stepping out from in front of her. "Sh-shino-kun...?"

He didn't respond, only giving her a meaningful look behind his dark glasses.

The Hyuuga heiress nodded and gulped, slowly approaching her crush. She only got a few paces however when her path was cut off by another taller ninja with silver hair in glasses.

'Na-Naruto-kun....'

"You guys should really calm it down," he said, adjusting his glasses as he scrutinized the Rookie 9. "You're drawing a lot of attention to yourselves."

"What does it matter?" Ino asked.

"Well," he sighed patiently. "You guys are all rookies right? You've already got that against you... A lot of people here already resent you because they've been waiting years to participate in the exam while you guys are here straight out of the Academy. This isn't a game we're playing... You need to be cautious."

"I suppose we should thank you for the advice," Kiba said grudgingly. "But just who are you? And why are you warning us?"

"Oh, how rude of me! I'm Yakushi Kabuto," He bowed and then smiled, fingering the leaf hitai-ate adorned on his forehead. "Us Leaf Ninja have to stick together, ne?"

"Have you participated in the Chunin Exams before, Yakushi-san?" Sakura asked.

"Kabuto is just fine," he said. "And yes, this would be my seventh time participating."

The Rookie 9 paused and stared at him. Seven times...? How many people would go through an exam that many times just to fail over and over again? Was it truly that difficult?
Understanding the meaning behind their gazes, Kabuto smiled bashfully. "Information gathering is my specialty, not combat..."

"Information gathering?"

The silver haired ninja turned his gaze towards the Uchiha. "I specialize in gathering information on other ninja," He drew a pack of cards out of his weapons pouch. "Each card in this deck, when charged with my chakra, displays information on each of the participants in this year's exam."

Sasuke was intrigued. "Every participant?"

Kabuto smiled. "Is there someone in particular you want to learn more about?"

The dark haired ninja grinned. "Yeah... as a matter of fact there is..."

oooo

The three Sound ninja sat in the back of the other room, surveying the Leaf ninjas' antics with a critical eye. The short blonde had just told off the silver haired ninja with glasses, as well as the Uchiha about snooping through people's personal information while they were present. Didn't he know that nothing was secret in a village full of ninja?

"That little one is obnoxious..." the ninja by the name of Zaku scoffed. "What's name? Umazaki?"

"It doesn't matter," said another, Dosu. "He's not our target." He paused, resting a hand on his arm. "But if he manages to get in the way..."

Zaku grinned knowingly. "We kill him?"

Dosu nodded.

Kin rolled her eyes at the battle-lust in her teammates' eyes. She couldn't help but share their excitement, however. "Hmph... this is gonna be fun."

oooo

Naruto sped through the trees, cursing lightly under her breath. Even though they'd managed their way through the written part of the exam (Who in their right mind would've expected it to be psychological? Seriously?!) Naruto had known the rest was going to be far from a cake walk. After all, what test would be simple when it took place in something called the 'Forest of Death'?

Her clothes were dirty and smudged, her hair looking as if she'd been caught in a windstorm - which she had. In fact, she'd been attacked by Ame ninja, separated from her teammates by a huge gust of wind, and then nearly devoured by a giant snake!

'Creepy Proctor Lady never mentioned anything about that thing! This is ridiculous!' Leaping from one tree to another, she let out a low growl of frustration. She had to track down her teammates and fast!
In the distance the trees lit up with a plume of flame. A Katon jutsu no doubt... 'Is that Sasuke...?' With a powerful leap helped her break through the trees as she honed in on the presence of her teammates. What she saw was totally unexpected.

Sakura stood to the side, her whole body paralyzed in fear as she watched Sasuke engage a Kusa ninja with wide, fearful eyes. From her standpoint it couldn't even be considered a fight. Even though his Sharingan was activated, it was plain to see that Sasuke was just as terrified of this ninja as Sakura. 'Just what the heck is going on...?'

Sasuke suddenly stumbled back with a yell as the Grass ninja rushed towards him, her body stretching and coiling as she went, almost like a snake's. Wasting no time, Naruto drew a handful of shuriken from her pouch, throwing them in the older nin's path to halt her attack. "Leave my teammates alone!"

The Grass ninja halted, staring up at the blonde with narrowed eyes. "Ah, so you survived my snake..." She pouted. "Pity."

Naruto dropped down on the branch in front of Sasuke, bristling. "For you maybe," she hissed. "I don't appreciate being nearly eaten alive... and I don't like that you're picking on my friends."

The lull in battle brought Sasuke back to his senses, chakra charged eyes falling on that of his teammate. 'Naruto... When did she get here...?' It took a few seconds for him to realize that she was standing between him and the Grass ninja. "Be careful..." he hissed, forcing himself to his feet painfully. "That woman... isn't human..."

The Kusa nin smirked.

"What're you talking about?" Naruto blinked. Sasuke didn't answer her, keeping his eyes on the ninja in front of them. Though he was lucid and alert, his body still trembled in fear. 'What's with him... it's like back in Nami... What did this lady do to him?'

From her perch on the adjacent tree, Sakura bit her lip in worry. 'Sasuke-kun...'

"He's right to be frightened," the older ninja said softly, a sinister smile spreading across her face slowly. "Prey can always sense when they are in the presence of a predator." She tilted her head back, laughing maniacally.

~ "Foolish little brother..." ~

Her eyes focused on him and Sasuke backed up, his Sharingan fading away to normal black as terror overtook his senses.

~ "You are weak... Your hatred is not strong enough..." ~

The blonde beside him stared at him as if he'd grown a second head.

~ "...Weak..." ~

"Sasuke, snap out of it!"

"NARUTO, WATCH OUT!"
At Sakura's frantic call, Naruto looked up to see the other ninja rushing towards them murder in her eyes. Quick to act, the blonde pushed her teammate out of the way only to be slammed into the trunk of the tree. The ninja pinned her in place with a kunai to her arm, eliciting a scream of pain.


"There, there now," the Grass ninja cooed. "Why don't you stay out of my way like a good little ninja..." She trailed off, staring at the blonde below her.

Naruto was staring up at her, her face twisting up in a snarl as her features slowly began changing under the influence of the Kyuubi's chakra. As her whiskers darkened and her nails sharpened, she grasped the other ninja's kunai in her clawed hand, pulling it out as if it were a mere splinter.

The ninja's eyes widened in surprise at the sight. 'Ah, so you're that brat, eh...?' Her grin widened, only to be halted when the blonde launched towards her, knocking her away with almost inhuman strength.

"Naruto?!” Sakura gasped.

Her cry went unheard by the blonde. She could feel fire in her veins, indescribable anger towards this ninja in front of her washing over her along with an overpowering desire to kill. And yet she didn't even know this person... right?

~ KILL IT... ~ A voice in her head echoed. She remembered it - she'd heard it once before back in Nami no Kuni. ~ KILL IT FOR WHAT IT HAS DONE TO US... KILL IT! ~

Sasuke stared at the blonde as she tossed the kunai - that had currently been lodge in her arm - to the ground as if it were some useless thing. "Na... Naruto...?"

Red eyes that definitely were not Sharingan turned on him, narrowing in distaste. "What's the matter, Sasuke?" she sneered. "I thought you could fight your own battles?"

He scowled, clenching his fists at his sides. "I am NOT weak..."

"Of course not," the Kusa ninja said. "The #1 Rookie of your class... Sasuke of the Uchiha clan... What does some nobody orphan know about your strength?"

Naruto let out a hiss, turning her attention back to the enemy nin. "What did you say?"

"I've done my research," she replied. "What right does some talentless riff raff have to look down on one of the greatest Kekkei Genkai holders your village has to offer?"

"You shut your mouth!"

The grass ninja smirked as the blonde rushed towards her in fury. 'Too predictable...' She rushed to meet her head on, hand extended with chakra pooling at the end of her fingertips. She rammed her hand into Naruto's abdomen, causing her to let out a furious roar. "FIVE-PRONGED SEAL!"

Almost as if a light switch had been hit, the youki faded from Naruto's presence so quickly that she faded into blissful unconsciousness. Unfortunately, once unconscious, she slipped from the tree and plummeted towards the ground.
Sakura watched her fall, a scream of horror ripping from her throat. "NARUTO!!"

End Chapter 8
Chapter 9: For Whose Sake is it...?

Chapter Summary

And then suddenly everything went to pot.

But you knew it was going to happen anyway.

Chapter 9

Seated in the waiting room designated for the Jounin sensei of the participating genin teams, Kakashi paged through his ever present orange Icha Icha book, his eye grinning in amusement.

In this particular installment, the protagonist of the story - the everlasting epitome of all things manly, the ronin Jiro, had sent his faithful squire Akira to escort his latest... ahem conquest... Tsukiko-hime back to the stronghold of her fiancee. However, along the way the pair was waylaid by a young female bandit by the name of Hinawari. Insisting that they not be enemies, Akira - with suave cool learned from his master - convinced Hinawari to join them in their journey. However, as their journey continued, Akira became smitten with the young bandit, driven almost to the point of distraction. While the princess was bathing in a nearby stream, Akira confessed his attraction to the vivacious Hinawari and the two embraced each other, bodies entwining on the forest flo--

"How on earth can you sit there and read that smut?"

The droopy eyed Jounin paused in his reading, taking in the annoyed and amused expressions of Kurenai and Asuma, respectively. Once she had his attention, the kunoichi scowled slightly. "Don't you have any shame?"

"Only sometimes... Sundays mostly." His visible eye creased in amusement. "It's not really all that bad, you know. The part I'm on right now is really good - the squire and the handmaiden are doing it in the--"

"I don't wanna hear about it!" Kurenai's face was bright red now.

Asuma laughed out loud. "It's no use, Kurenai," he said, lighting a cigarette. "Kakashi's more attached to that book than he is his own students."

Kakashi blinked. "Well, that's not true..." he said defensively. He got along with his students just fine, thank you very much. "They can be interesting from time to time, too."

Kurenai huffed at his response.

A few moments later Gai entered the room, holding a tray filled with several steaming mugs of coffee. "Here I am, my friends!" he boomed as he approached the table where they sat, his toothy smile ever glistening. "I've returned with the coffee as promised!"

"Thank you, Gai-san," Kurenai smiled as he set down a purple coffee mug with a white orchid in front of her. Ahh, hazelnut, her favorite.
Asuma smirked as he set about adding cream to his own mug, dark blue depicting a monkey smoking a cigar. "Was there a hold up at the machine, Gai?" he joked. "We were starting to think you'd gone across town for town for our coffee."

"As a matter of fact, I did." Gai said with a grin. "To Akimomo's Kouhii-ya - no one makes it better." At their stunned expressions, he blinked in confusion. "Was I gone for that long? I promised myself that if I took too long I would do 900 laps around the village on my hand--"

"There's no need for that, Gai-san," Kurenai placated, gesturing for the green-clad ninja to sit down. "The coffee is still piping hot, see?"

He sighed in relief, adding cinnamon to his own neon green coffee mug. "I'm glad that I didn't fail the task, however I believe I should still do those laps... one can never slack off on honing their raging Spirit of Youth!"

"Youth... right..." Kakashi turned a page in his book, reaching for his own mug. It was orange, emblazoned with red circle with hatch mark through the middle - a symbol also found on the back cover of the book in his hand. However, before his fingers could wrap themselves around the handle, the mug cracked and split apart, its dark contents seeping out across the table.

"What the hell...?" Asuma blinked, as did the owner of the mug. "What happened? He didn't even touch it."

Gai's eyes widened. "Perhaps it's a bad omen? Certainly no harm has befallen your students!"

Kurenai made a clucking sound. "Don't be so superstitious..." However, her red eyes drifted over to Kakashi to gauge his reaction.

The Copy Ninja stared at the mess on the table, his face decidedly blank. Picking up the mug handle, he studied it with a forlorn sigh. "I really liked this mug."

The other Jounin groaned in response.

oooo

Special Jounin Mitarashi Anko had wanted an exciting exam this time around and it was starting to look as if her wish were granted. The lone team from Suna, the Dark Horse if rumors were to be believed, had been the first to enter the Tower after completing their mission. It was amazing that they had managed to do so in two days out of the five allotted. However, what was even more shocking than that was the fact that the three ninja had done so without gaining a single scratch. It was unheard of!

'Dark Horse, my ass...' The violet-haired woman grumbled, a grim smirk making its way across her face. She had surveyed the video footage replaying their entry into the building, Heaven and Earth scrolls in hand. The two older genin of the group had looked a little ruffled, relieved to have completed their task without any mishaps. The smaller one, however - the one her assistants had joked probably hadn't had to lift a finger the whole time - barely reacted it all. He stared around him as if nothing affected him. Yet, his eyes...

'...Not even the wildest of animals have eyes like that...' she thought to herself. 'Just what is that kid...?"
"Anko-san...?" The kunoichi blanced back up at two chunin who had summoned her to this spot. When they'd first notified her of the first genin team to be found dead, she'd been prepared to blow them off. After all, it was the Chunin Exams - death was to be expected at some point. However, when she'd started to tell them this, they told her that the three ninja had been found dead outside the training area ground.

That was a whole different matter entirely.

"What do you suppose happened to them?" asked one of the chunin.

"Who knows?" said the other. "There's no way to tell off the bat with their bodies so mangled."

"Step aside - lemme have a look." The two chunin cleared a path for the kunoichi. Laying eyes on the damages sustained by the corpses, her face went pale with shock. "Their faces..."

"Yeah... gone..." The chunin who had spoken shuddered in revulsion. "I only hope it happened after they died..."

"Kami... who would do such a thing?" Their superior turned from the scene, walking away stiffly. "Anko-san?"

"There's only person capable of this..." She recognized his handiwork almost instantly. 'Damn him and his kinjutsu...!' She turned back to the two puzzled chunin, her normal manic expression gravely serious. "Notify the Hokage at once... Orochimaru is back in the village."

The two men gasped in horror, but at the sharp look she sent them, they straightened up quickly. "Yes, ma'am!" Giving a sharp salute, they both vanished from sight.

"Damn it!" Anko gazed at the three corpses one last time before slamming her fist into the grave marker by which they lay.

Orochimaru... the one she had once trusted, the man she had once called 'sensei'... She'd followed his orders without question, unaware that he'd done unspeakable things - against enemy and ally alike. He'd used her and her teammates as guinea pigs in his sick experiments knowing full well that they might not survive. She had been one of the few who had.

'Lucky me...' Her eyes darkened at the sudden onslaught of memories. Orochimaru had betrayed her. He'd betrayed the entire village. And for what? A hand went up slowly, clenching lightly at the meeting of her neck and shoulders as if to soothe some phantom pain.

"Why are you here?" she wondered. "What is it that you want? But more importantly..." She paused a moment, before phasing away from the crime scene. "Whose life are you here to ruin?"

Before long she was running across the rooftops, only one goal in mind. She had to get back to the Forest of Death and fast.

'I only hope I'm not too late.'

oooo

"NARUTO!!" Watching her friend begin the fall that would lead to her imminent death, Sakura
knew she had to act quickly. Drawing a kunai from her pouch, she sent a quick prayer to Kami as she hurled her blade towards the blonde with all her might. It caught the back of the other kunoichi's jacket, pinning her to the tree where she dangled precariously out of danger - for now. "Thank goodness..."

"You shouldn't interfere, little girl..." The pink-haired kunoichi snapped her head up, green eyes widening in horror at the sight of the Kusa ninja rushing towards her. She gasped, quickly reaching for another kunai.

The sight of the enemy nin rushing towards his teammate snapped the Uchiha out of his stupor. Red Sharingan flashing, he leapt from his tree towards them, hands flying as he went. "Katon: HOUSENKA NO JUTSU!!" His fear and desperation fueled his attack, the bursts of flame shooting forth hot and bright. The fire shot towards Grass kunoichi's face, causing her to cry out in surprise. Smoldering and in pain, she retreated backwards, vanishing upwards into the canopy.

"Sasuke-kun!" Sakura's eyes shone with relief as she stared at her teammate and crush. 'That look is gone...' she thought to herself. 'I don't like seeing Sasuke-kun looking like that... it's just not right...'

The Uchiha knelt down next to her, his chakra charged eyes scanning for any sign of injury. She blushed under the scrutiny. "You're all right?" he asked softly.

"Um... yes..." she murmured. "You?" He didn't respond. She turned away from him, her eyes scanning the trees above. "Where did she go...?"

"I don't know." A scowl formed on the Avenger's face, hiding his uneasiness. "But we need to get out of here fast - we can't beat her."

~ "You are weak... Your hatred is not strong enough..." ~

Sakura slowly rose to her feet, her eyes falling on the unconscious blonde still pinned against the tree. "We've got to get Naruto down first..."

Sasuke nodded absently, remembering the look she had given him earlier. She'd been confused by his behavior... disappointed...

~ "What's the matter, Sasuke? I thought you could fight your own battles?" ~

"Go get her down," Sakura nodded, already leaping in the blonde's direction. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Moulding chakra to her feet, Sakura walked up the trunk to where Naruto was positioned. However, before she could pull her down, something flashed passed her, drawing her attention back to Sasuke. "Sasuke-kun!"

The boy looked up at the sound of her cry only to see the Kusa nin dropping down towards him. Her face was badly burned from his fire attack but there was no mistaking the murderous intent in her eyes. Before he could move, she was down on top of him, pressing his shoulders against the rough bark. With a devilish laugh, she opened her mouth to reveal snake like fangs that she then proceeded to sink deep into his neck.

"SASUKE-KUN!" Sakura cried out as her teammate howled in pain.
Pulling away, the older kunoichi smirked surveying the mark that was slowly beginning to form over the bite marks. "Excellent, my work here is done..." She laughed as the boy curled in on himself, crying out in anguish.

"You monster!" Sakura screamed, tears running down her cheeks at the sight of her crush in such agony. "What did you do to Sasuke-kun?"

"Sasuke is such an amazing child" she answered. "I was so impressed by his skill that I left him a little gift."

"A.. a gift...?"

"That's right," The older ninja paused, reaching up to her face to pull away the damaged skin. Sakura began to turn away in revulsion, but stopped when she realized there lay a perfectly unblemished face underneath.

'She's... she's a man...!' she thought in horror, taking in the pale skin and snake-like eyes glittering back at her. "Just who are you?!"

"My name is Orochimaru," the ninja answered. "And I meant what I said...." He gazed down at Sasuke with a predatory look on his face. "I am impressed by your skill... you have so much potential..." His grin widened as red eyes stared back up at him in terror. "I can help you realize that potential. If you survive the effects of the Curse Seal, which I'm sure you will, come and seek me out. I will show you what it means to have true power." He sunk down into the wood of the tree branch, vanishing from sight.

Once she was certain the danger was gone, she freed Naruto and carried her over to where Sasuke lay. She could see whatever that strange ninja had done to him was already starting to take effect; the boy had broken out into a cold sweat, his body twitching in pain. Teary eyed and frightened, she clutched the boy to her chest, trying her best to soothe him. "Sasuke-kun... Naru-kun... what am I supposed to do now?"

oooo

"How long are we just gonna sit here? I'm hungry..."

Ino's eye twitched. "You ate an hour ago..." she said tersely, turning to her portly teammate. "And you've got a bag of chips in your hand right now..."

"Yeah," Chouji groaned. "But I need some real food... When're we gonna get outta here?"

The blonde kunoichi's eyebrow twitched again. "Until we find a team that has the scroll that we need, we're not going anywhere!"

'A weak team was more like it...' She thought with a groan. Though their team was modeled after their fathers', the Ino-Shika-Cho formation, that was really where their similarities ended. No matter how well she had done in the Academy, she and her team were just not suited for these types of situations. 'After all, we're the weakest team out here... even Neji thinks so...'

They'd stumbled across the Hyuuga prodigy a few hours back and he'd smugly deemed them unworthy of his attention. He hadn't even bothered to fight them!
'It's not fair!' Ino raged. 'Why'd I hafta be stuck with such a useless team! If only I could've been paired with Sasuke-kun! Darn that Sakura..'

"Man, this is such a waste of time," Shikamaru grumbled from his reclined position on the ground.

"Shut up, Shikamaru!" she snapped at him. "We are gonna get a scroll - I refuse to lose to that Forehead Girl again! I refuse!"

The lazy genin gave her a measuring look for a moment, but before she could ask him just what the heck he was staring at, he jumped up and clamped a hand over her mouth. She mumbled in outrage, earning a serious glare from the laidback boy. "Shut up," he whispered. "Somebody's coming this way."

Both Ino and Chouji tensed, taking notice of the rustling sound coming closer to their hiding spot.

'Aww man... is this it?' the Akimichi gulped, clenching his potato chips for dear life.

Ino scowled, drawing a kunai from her pack. 'Whatever it is... I'm ready for it..

The rustling got louder and louder until the bush in front of them suddenly parted. The three waited with bated breath for their enemy to emerge only to gasp in surprise when Haruno Sakura, supporting both of her unconscious teammates, staggered out towards them.

Chouji dropped his chips in surprise.

Green eyes snapped to them wildly, widening in surprise. "I-Ino...?"

"Sakura...?" Ino blinked a few moments before letting her blue eyes fall on that of her crush. "What the HELL did you do to my Sasuke-kun?!"

"Can it, Ino," Shikamaru walked past her, taking Naruto from the tired kunoichi. After laying the blonde down in the grass, he took the time to gaze at all three of them and the damages they had sustained. He didn't like it one bit. "You guys are thrashed," he remarked idly. "What happened?"

Sakura stared at them a few minutes before dropping to her knees in exhaustion. In the following minutes she relayed everything that had happened to her and her team since entering the forest - leaving out the parts about Naruto's strange transformation and the strange mark that had appeared on Sasuke's neck. Once she finished her tale, Team 10 stared at her in silent horror.

The shadow user was the first to break the silence. "Damn..." He rubbed his neck, frowning in thought. "I don't get it, why would someone who's obviously of Jounin level skill be participating in the exam?"

"Could it be a part of the test?" Chouji suggested.

"No... there's no way..." Sakura trembled, remembering. Her mind replayed the genjutsu the grass ninja had placed she and Sasuke under after her/his arrival. She could still feel her body being torn apart... "I've never seen a Jounin with powers like that! That *thing* wasn't human, I swear!"

"You say that only cause he's out of your league," Ino said, trying to break the tension. "I mean, Sasuke-kun is one thing, but really... how hard is it to beat Dead Last Naruto?"
Her rival's eyes hardened in annoyance. "Naruto's a lot stronger than you think," she said, glancing down at her unconscious teammate. Unlike Sasuke, Sakura still couldn't find any signs of what that Orochimaru-person had done to her. None of her attempts to cancel out the strange jutsu had worked. 'Why won't you wake up...?' "He took them both down like they were nothing..."

"Hn, I can tell," said Chouji, surveying the damage his fellow truant had sustained. The left shoulder of her jacket had gone from bright orange to dark red. He frowned slightly in worry. "Have you taken a look at his injury yet?"

Sakura glanced up as the Akimichi boy unzipped the blonde's jacket, jumping forward to stop him. "Wait--!"

Team 10 let out a collective gasp of surprise.

Beneath her jacket Naruto had worn a light-weight kevlar like vest meant to diminish damage sustained by sharp weaponry. It was durable but thin, the form-fitting material following the contours of her body, letting everybody know what been kept hidden from so long.

"Sakura..." It was Ino who spoke first this time. "Why the hell does the moron have boobs?!"

The pink haired kunoichi flushed, frowning at her friend-turned-rival. "Naruto is not a moron," she said. "And 'he' has... boobs... because 'he' is a 'she'."

"WHAT?!"

"Are you serious?" Chouji gaped, despite the obvious evidence in front of him.

"Since when?" Ino barked, incredulous.

"Since she was born, maybe?" Sakura snapped tiredly. She felt guilty for allowing Naruto's secret to be revealed. Would this affect their friendship? 'Please don't be angry with me, Naruto...'
"People just assumed that she was a boy so she just let them believe what they wanted."

Shikamaru was stunned into silence. 'You've gotta be kidding me...'

"Wow," said Chouji, scratching his head. "All those years we were hangin' out with a girl... isn't that somethin', Shikamaru?"

Uzumaki Naruto... a girl? 'And to think all that time she spent listening to me complain about females in general...' He'd griped about everyone from his mother to Ino and the blonde had always laughed. Despite himself, the Shadow User smirked. "This is unreal..."

"That's the understatement of the year," Ino snorted. She then turned back to Sakura. "So, what're you gonna do now?"

"Huh?"

"We're still in the middle of the exam, you know," Shikamaru replied, turning serious once again. Sakura frowned slightly. "Both your teammates are down for the count... It's just you now."

"I know,"
Ino 'hmphed'. 'Whatcha gonna do now, Sakura?' she thought with a sneer. 'Now that you don't have Sasuke-kun to hide behind...'

"I'm going to protect them."

"Huh?"

Sakura met her rival's disbelieving stare. "They need me," she said. "I can't let them down now."

"Well now, isn't that cute?" Sakura and Team 10 jumped at the new voice in the forest clearing. The kunoichi from Otogakure, Kin, leered down at them, kunai in hand. "She wants to stand up and fight for her widdle boyfwends."

Zaku jumped down out of the trees, landing beside her. He grinned maniacally. "Too bad she doesn't stand a chance against us," he laughed.

"None of them are a match for us," Dosu agreed as he appeared out of the shadows. His visible eye narrowed. "Now hand over the Uchiha boy and we won't have to kill you.

"What?!!"

oooo

Weapons mistress and sole female member of Team Gai - a fact she often lamented when her sensei was feeling especially spirited - Tenten nodded in satisfaction at the sight of the two scrolls in their possession. As far as she was concerned, the mission was accomplished. She glanced at her two teammates, curious as to what their next move would be. "Are we heading back to the tower now?" she asked.

"We cannot possibly, Tenten-chan!" Lee exclaimed, clenching his fists to his chest. "I have not yet had the chance to experience a good fight!"

The kunoichi rolled her eyes and then glanced at her other teammate, eyebrows arched in curiosity.

The previous year's #1 Rookie, Hyuuga Neji, closed his eyes and glanced away to illustrate his absolute disinterest in the subject at hand. "Do what you want," he grunted, ignoring the squeal of glee from his bowl-cut bearing teammate. "But stay out of trouble."

"Yosh!" Lee did a little dance of victory.

Neji scoffed.

Tenten shook her head in amusement. "Lee..." Turning back to the Hyuuga to prevent him from saying anything too mean - he really could say some cruel things when Lee got into one of his moods - her words were drowned out by a sound of a feminine scream.

"Oohhhhh," Lee's dark eyes snapped into the dark forest. "That was my beloved Sakura-san!" he exclaimed worriedly, legs already tensing to propel him into the canopy.

"Stay out of it, Lee," Neji cautioned. "It's none of our business." Lee made a face at him before shooting off into the trees. "Lee-- that idiot!"
Tenten shook her head. "We should follow him and make sure he doesn't do anything stupid..."

The white-eyed ninja scowled. "It's Lee..." he growled, feeling that was answer enough.

The kunoichi only sighed as they followed after their teammate.

oooo

Sakura let out a short cry of pain as she was slammed into a tree. She struggled to pull herself upwards but Zaku was upon her again, preparing yet another vicious assault.

He laughed wickedly as she hit the ground, flopping like a ragdoll. "Are you kidding me?" He sneered as the smaller kunoichi staggered to her feet once more. "How on earth did a weakling like you expect to make it through the Chunin Exams? Is this the best you Leaf Ninja hafta offer?"

The Leaf Kunoichi scowled, slowly reaching for her weapons' pouch. Kin appeared behind her, gathering her long hair in her hands with a harsh yank. "Don't lump all kunoichi in with this wimp, Zaku," she snapped, ignoring Sakura's strangled whimpers. "See for yourself? This one spends more time on her looks than her training..." She pulled Sakura's head closer to hers, grinning down at her. "Bet you thought this was all a game, ne? Wanted to impress some boy...?"

'Sasuke-kun...' Sakura clenched her eyes shut, willing back tears. The Oto-nin's words hurt far worse than any of her injuries. She was weak - she'd prided herself on her knowledge, her ability to recite information at command... and yet none of that meant a thing! 'I am weak... I'm a disgrace as a kunoichi...!' A flash of blonde passed through her mind, bringing back her conversation with Naruto all those days ago... ~ "You're the brains behind our operation!" ~ she'd said. ~ "With Sasuke as the skill and me as the strength, the three of us make up one complete ninja!" ~

Naruto... she'd promised herself that she would be stronger...

~ "...Sakura-nee-chan's my role model." ~

She'd become someone worthy of the praise the blonde had bestowed on her. However, she couldn't do that if she allowed herself to be killed! 'I have to protect them! I have to protect them!' she thought to herself, fighting to push down the pain. 'But... what am I supposed to do...?'

oooo

"This is bad..." Chouji moaned, trembling beside his two teammates in the safety of the bushes. He glanced at them in worry. "Shouldn't we do something?"

At the arrival of the enemy nin, Sakura had risen to confront them without hesitation. Her companions had voiced their objections, but they went unheeded. ~ "It's about time I'm the one doing the protecting," ~ she'd said. ~ "Instead of the other way around." ~

"Like what?" asked Shikamaru, his face deathly pale. "We're nothing compared to those guys... they'd wipe the floor with us!"

'Because we're weak...' Ino stared with wide, horrified eyes as the girl she had once called her friend took beating after vicious beating at the hands of those Ototakure ninja. 'But so are you,
Sakura... Hell, you wouldn't even be a ninja if it weren't for me!'  

She remembered the insecure little girl she had come across all those years ago. She'd taken her under her wing, built up her courage and self-esteem. And for what... so she could stab her in the back over some boy...? Sure, Ino knew she was just as smitten with the Uchiha boy as all the other girls, but Sakura... she'd been so smug about it!

"Damn it," Ino bit her lip harshly, her hands clenched at her sides. "Stupid Forehead Girl..."

Shikamaru gave her a look.

"Sa... Sakura-neechan..."

The members of Team 10 nearly jumped out of the bush at the sight of the small blonde slowly rousing out of unconsciousness. She opened bleary blue eyes, staring at them all in confusion. "Where is she...?"

A hand to his chest, Shikamaru gave a heavy sigh of relief. "Cripes... Naruto... you okay?"

Naruto sat up, brow furrowed in confusion. "Shikamaru...? What are you--?" A sharp cry drew her eyes from the Nara boy to that of her teammate still in Kin's clutches. Naruto's eyes widened as she jumped to her feet. "SAKURA!"

The pink-haired kunoichi's green eyes widened. 'Naruto...?!' Zaku was rapidly speeding towards her, arms raised to strike. Knowing that she couldn't allow herself to die so easily, she drew a kunai from her pouch, twirling it in her hand expertly. Without wasting any words, she brought it up to the back of her head, hacking her hair free from Kin's grip.

Everyone present gaped in surprise.

Still on his collision course, Zaku was the first to recover. "Big deal!" he snorted, chakra waves charging around his hand. "You're still gonna di--!"

"KONOHA SENPUU!!" A blur of green appeared in front of the Sound ninja, delivering a powerful kick to his chest. His momentum thrown off, he collided with a startled Kin, knocking the girl unconscious.

Glancing up at her saviour, Sakura could barely believe her eyes.

"L-Lee?!!" Naruto gawked.

"Who is that guy?!!" Ino exclaimed. Chouji just shrugged.

Moving to stand in front of Sakura, the taijutsu master frowned. "Sakura," he said softly. The girl blinked. "You should see to your teammates."

Too stunned to do anything else, Sakura did as he asked. As she stumbled off, Lee struck what would come to be forever known as the 'Good Guy' pose. Had the situation not been so dire, Naruto might have laughed. "Never fear, Sakura-san!" he exclaimed, teeth shining. "I will not allow you to come to harm - I promised to protect you until the day I die!"

Frustrated with how things were unfolding, Dosu scowled beneath his bandages as he drew his
gauntlet covered arm from his sleeve. "That day will be today if you don't get out of the way!" he
snarled, firing a blast of air at the boy's turned back.

"Oi, watch out!" Naruto dove from the bushes, shoving him out of the way. As the two hit the
ground, the three behind them exploded in a shower of splinters.

"Whoa... was that a Fuuton?!" Chouji asked.

"What ever it was, they actually dodged it!" Ino exclaimed, surprised. She'd never thought the
Dead Last blonde could move so fast...

"No..." Shikamaru said, watching as the two Leaf ninja suddenly dropped to their knees, hands
clutched to their heads. "It got them..."

Dosu chuckled darkly. "At least that kid gets it..." Team 10 tensed. "It's a sound attack... it doesn't
have to hit you to hurt you..."

"Naruto... Lee...!" Sakura exclaimed.

Naruto let out a low keening sound, trying to fight off the wave of vertigo assaulting her senses.
Vaguely she could hear her teammate calling out to her. "Get out of here, Sakura!" she cried out.
"And take Sasuke with you!"

"But..."

"The Uchiha's not goin' anywhere!" Though a little disoriented, Zaku was back on his feet and
pissed as ever.

'They're after Sasuke, too?!' Sakura gasped. 'Are they working for that Orochimaru person?'

"Sakura...!"

"No!" she exclaimed, shaking her head wildly. "I'm not going to leave you behind!"

"Then you're gonna DIE!"

Before anyone cold move there was a sudden rush of chakra, darker and more sinister than any of
them had ever recalled encountering. It washed over the small forest clearing, drawing everyone's
eyes to the dark haired boy who had just risen from his spot in the safety of the bushes.

"Huh?" Zaku said stupidly.

Sakura's expression mirrored his. "Sasuke-kun...?" Her eyes darkened in confusion. 'But... what
happened...?'

The Uchiha stepped into the clearing, dark purple chakra rushing around him like a cyclone. His
Sharingan eyes were wild and unseeing and black marks spread across his face and arms like a
dark flame. He looked... inhuman. At her hesitant call, he turned to her, taking in the scrapes and
bruises littering her body. She shuddered under his gaze, the timid feelings of pleasure and security
non-existent. He took in her short, choppy hair, his eyes suddenly narrowing. "Sakura," he rasped.
"Who did that to you...?"
She froze, not liking the look in his eyes. "Ah..."

Zaku stepped forward and red and black eyes snapped to him. "I did it," he sneered. "What're you gonna do about it?"

The dark chakra flared around him. The Uchiha tensed, sliding his body into a fighting stance. His body blurred out of existence, reappearing in front of Zaku as he clamped his hands around his wrists. The older boy gasped in surprise. "Don't put your hands on Sakura..." he warned.

The Oto-ninja scoffed, drawing his hands up to attack once more. "Yeah right! I'll do whatever I feel like--" He started to draw chakra into hands. "So let go of me!"

"You had your chance," Sasuke tightened his grip on one of his hands, letting go of the other so he could pin the first arm behind the boy's back.

Both Zaku and Dosu gasped in shock. "What?!"

Red eyes studies the tubes feeding through his hand as if it weren't a weapon used to kill people. "You've had your body altered to increase your strength," he observed. "You're pretty proud of these arms of yours, aren't you?" Zaku's eyes widened as he felt the Leaf ninja's foot on his back, pressing him down towards the ground while his arm was held in place. The crack that followed was drowned out by his screams of pain.

Horrified at what was taking place, Ino glanced away, hiding behind Shikamaru's arm. "Oh my God..." She felt like she was going to be sick...

"Sasuke-kun..." Sakura did not whether to run towards him or away from him. This was wrong! This wasn't the boy she knew! "Sasuke-kun, please stop it!"

Sasuke ignored her, taking amusement in the screams of his victim.

Naruto rose to her feet, pale blue eyes taking in the scene playing out in front of her. 'He's torturing that kid... and he's enjoying it...!' Memories of angry mobs passed before her eyes, throwing sticks and rocks and shouting cries of 'demon' filled her brain. Her pain suddenly faded away and she found herself in front of her teammate, the palm of her hand colliding with the side of his face. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!" she exclaimed.

Red eyes narrowed at her, disregarding the sting. "Stay out of my way," he snarled.

The blonde stepped back as if she were the one that had been slapped. The way he had looked at her... 'Almost like I'm gonna be next....?'

Reinforcing her fears, Sasuke released Zaku - who had passed out from the pain - and approached her slowly. "Naruto..." he growled out. She tensed, preparing herself for whatever he planned.

She was always there in front of him, fighting his fights, stealing his glory... There was such an overwhelming feeling of fury within him dying to get out. He'd release by fighting her. '...I'll prove to you once and for all... I am stronger than you...'

"Sasuke-kun!" And then suddenly the madness and fury gone, replaced by confusion. He stilled, glancing at the arms wrapped tightly around his torso. Something warm and wet was seeping into the back of his shirt. There was also the scent of strawberries. "Sakura...?"
The kunoichi stilled, refusing to glance up at him. She didn't want to see that look. However, the boy turned in her arms, and she was forced to meet his gaze. There was was a rush of relief when she realized that he was staring down at her not in anger, but in confusion. Tears rolling down her face, she buried her face in his shirt. "Thank goodness," she sobbed. "Thank goodness you're back!"

Sasuke tensed. 'Back... Where did I go...?' He tried to recall the last couple of hours, frowning when he came up with nothing. He glanced over at Naruto for some sort of clarification, but the blonde only backed away from him, her eyes wary. 'What...? What happened...?'

Dosu frowned. 'He actively drew upon the power of the Curse Seal Orochimaru-sama place upon him...' He reached into the folds of his gi. 'He's strong... too strong...' "Uchiha Sasuke..." The Leaf genin looked up at him, eyes narrowing at the sight of the two scrolls he held in his hand. He placed them on the ground before backing away. "We surrender to you for now..." He collected his unconscious teammates, bounding up into the tree above. "But we'll be back to finish this fight... Mark my words." With that, he vanished.

"I beat them..." Sasuke glanced at Sakura. "Didn't I...?"

'He doesn't remember?' Unsure of what else to say, Sakura only nodded.

oooo

From their spot in the trees, Tenten wiped her brow in relief. "Guess we weren't needed after all."

"Hn," Neji answered, studying the rookie ninja beneath him. 'Uchiha Sasuke... so this is your strength...?' "What an interesting exam this is turning out to be." He jumped down out of the tree, Tenten following after him, announcing his presence to the other Leaf Genin.

"We're Lee's teammates," Tenten exclaimed when the others tensed for a fight. "You guys okay?"

Blushing, Sakura stepped away from Sasuke. The boy frowned at her but didn't object. "Yeah..." she answered. "But Lee...?"

Naruto had already hoisted the boy up, bringing him over to his teammate to take. The weapons mistress thanked her, giving Sakura an encouraging smile. "We'll take care of him." she said. "And since your friend is up already, Lee should be in no time, too..."

Aware of Naruto's strange habit of quick recovery, none of Team 7 knew what to say about that one.

"Let's go, Tenten," Neji said, returning to the trees once more. The bun-haired girl nodded, turning to follow him.

"When he wakes up..." Tenten paused and glanced back at Sakura once more. The pink haired kunoichi glanced at Lee's unconscious face before staring at the ground. "Would you thank him for me?"

Smiling, Tenten nodded. "Will do." She crouched down slightly before bounding upwards into the canopy, vanishing from sight.

"Man, glad that's over with," Chouji groaned.
"We could've been killed and that's all you've got to say?!” Ino exclaimed. "And we didn't even get a scroll..."

"Here!"

Shikamaru caught the scroll that had suddenly been tossed towards them. He stared down at it, eyes widening at the sight of the kanji for 'Heaven' dispalyed across the outside. It was the one they needed! He studied the blonde who had tossed it to them. "You sure you wanna give this to us?" he asked.

"We started out with Heaven and Bandage-kid gave us an Earth scroll, too." The blonde said with a shrug. "Besides, you kinda helped us."

"Kinda...?" Shikamaru couldn't keep the smirk from his face. 'Same old Naruto...'

"Leaf Ninja gotta stick together, ne?"

"Yeah, I guess so," he rose to his feet, signaling his teammates to do the same. "Well, we better get outta here. You guys take care."

Naruto grinned. "See ya later, guys!" Once they were gone, she turned back to her teammates. "I don't know about you guys, but I've had just about as much of this forest as I can stand."

"You're not kidding," Sakura agreed. "Should we had to the Tower now?"

"Heck yeah!" The blonde bounded off.

"Naruto, wait a minute!" Casting a quick glance at the Uchiha, the pink-haired girl took off after her.

Sasuke stayed in the clearin a few moments longer, watching them go. They looked at him differently now, as if something had changed. 'But what...?' He frowned, staring at his hands. 'Just what did that guy do to me...?'

Knowing he wouldn't get any answers in the middle of the forest, he took off after them.

End Chapter 9
Chapter 10: Fight!

Chapter Summary

Now the exam's really getting under way; does the team have what it takes to make it through?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 10

Dosu resisted the urge to growl in frustration. Both his teammates were unconscious, no thanks to those annoying Leaf genin - the Uchiha in particular.

*Sasuke*... His visible eye narrowed in malice. The odds that the younger boy would survive the Curse Mark planted on him by Orochimaru were supposed to have been very slim. However, not only had he survived it, but he had somehow managed to tap into the power it contained. He had defeated Zaku so easily! They'd been set up to take a fall without even knowing it. They were lucky to be alive!

He paused, staring down at the damage done to Zaku. Both the boy's arms were dislocated, possibly broken. If those his two teammates hadn't stepped forward when they had, the Uchiha would have most likely slain him where he stood. "But then why did the Otokage send us if he knew that would happen...?"

"Orochimaru-sama is not in the practice of having his orders questioned."

Dosu turned, drawing a kunai to lash out at the sudden presence behind him. He narrowed his visible eye. "What are *you* doing here?" he spat.

"I believe that should be my line," said the nin in the shadows. "If I'm not mistaken, you were only supposed to give the Uchiha and his team *one* scroll."

The Sound ninja flinched guiltily.

There was a chuckle as two scrolls were dropped at his feet. He frowned in confusion. "Don't you need these?" he asked.

"You shouldn't worry about me," the figure said. "After all, Orochimaru does not take kindly to repeated failures." Though the ninja's tone was light, the warning was quite clear. "Good luck in the next round."

Dosu remained silent as the figure vanished back into the shadows, moonlight glinting off of thin spectacles.

Securing the two scrolls in his pack, the Oto-nin shouldered the weight of his teammates, heading off towards the Tower. *You managed this time around... but you can only go so far before that*
thing consumes you...’ He leaped up into the trees, his eye gleaming in determination. ’And when that happens, I’ll be waiting for you!"

oooo

Though outwardly he exuded a cavalier sense of calm only an ex-ANBU could ever hope to possess, on the inside Hatake Kakashi was not happy ninja. He'd known the minute he'd moment he’d received the new roster for this year's teams that Sasuke would be assigned to him. After all, he was the last Uchiha in Konoha and Kakashi was the only one who had the ability to teach him how to utilize his own Sharingan. Given that he'd taken the boy into his care, it was to be expected that he would be a little upset to learn that one of Hi no Kuni's strongest and most dangerous criminals - one of the Sannin for Kami's sake - sought that power for himself.

The details he had been given were sketchy at best - many people were still in denial about the Snake Master's return - but he knew that his genin had been in contact with him. A small part of him was impressed that they had managed to survive the altercation - but on the whole he could not ever recall a time he had been more worried for the three children under his command.

Sasuke had been marked by Orochimaru. He now bore a Curse Seal that, according to Mitarashi Anko, would feed off of his negative emotions, supplying him with power but ultimately corrupting his mind.

Kakashi could already see the effects it was having on the genin. Having succeeded the second part of the exam in the Forest of Death, those who remained were to compete in a preliminary battle to thin out their numbers. In the first bout of the day, Sasuke - despite protests to have him pulled from the competition - was paired against Akado Yoroi.

To say that the battle was a smooth one would be lying.

Fighting against a ninja who specialized in leeching away your chakra when the majority of it was being hindered by a dark seal made fighting to win most difficult. There’d been a great deal of concern from the administration when the boy had tapped into the seal's power to give him the boost he needed to achieve victory. It was only through a show of great restraint that he hadn't allowed it to overcome him.

In defeating his opponent, Sasuke had shown great strength, but a seed had been planted; it was only a matter of time.

His facade slipping just slightly, Kakashi frowned in concern. If Orochimaru's plans were to succeed, the Curse Seal would overcome Sasuke, plunging him into darkness. He couldn't allow that to happen.

If not for Sasuke's sake, then for Obito's.

oooo

Sakura stood by the double doors leading into the auditorium, wringing her hands in worry. The moment his battle had ended, Sasuke had been whisked away to parts unknown. The adults seemed to know a great deal about what was going on, but no one wanted to tell them anything. It wasn't fair!

'Sasuke-kun...' she bit her lip in worry, remembering the wild-eyed look he'd turned on them in the
Forest of Death, and again at the beginning of the preliminaries. She'd been concerned about him, suggesting that it would be better for him to withdraw from the competition.

~ "I don't care about becoming a Chunin," ~ he'd said coldly, tightly grasping her wrist to keep her from drawing attention to them. ~ "I'm only here to fight strong opponents." ~ He spared Naruto a look so intense that the blonde almost looked away. ~ "So stay out of my way." ~

The kunoichi didn't know what was worse, the fact that he disregarded her concern so callously or the fact that he viewed her as a distraction in the way of his goal.

'Is that really how you think of me... Sasuke-kun...?' Her morose thoughts were halted as the doors behind her suddenly opened, revealing her tired-looking sensei on the other side. "Kakashi-sensei!"

The jounin paused, his expression falling back into his usual lackadaisical expression before his eye closed in a grin. "Ah, hello, Sakura," he said.

The pink haired genin wasted no time with pleasantries. "Where's Sasuke-kun? Is he gonna be all right? Why won't anyone tell us anything?"

Kakashi hesitated, fixing his expression into its usual blank state. How do you explain to a 12 year old that her teammate had been cursed by one of the strongest and diabolical ninja ever to come out of Konoha? As far as Kakashi was concerned, you didn't. He smiled placatingly. "Sasuke? He's resting right now - that fight took a lot out of him."

"He'll be all right, won't he?" He knew she wanted to ask about the mark on Sasuke's neck, but was impressed by her restraint. "He's not acting... strange, is he?"

Strange...? Judging by the expression on the kunoichi's face, she seemed to be more concerned about Sasuke's behavior than his injuries. Just what had happened in the forest? The gray-haired jounin glanced from her to her teammate for clarification, but the blonde's back was turned to them, focused - almost purposefully - on the fight currently taking place. Strange indeed... "No, he's just fine." The blonde's posture seemed to relax a little. "So no worries."

"I'm glad," Sakura brought a hand to her heart, sighing in relief. "For a moment there..."

~ "Stay out of my way," ~

She glanced at Naruto worriedly. The blonde hadn't spoken a word since the tournament began. Was she worried about Sasuke as well...?

oooo

Zaku let out a strangled cry, the chakra gone from his body.

The exam proctor, a sickly looking jounin by the name of Gekkou Hayate, approached his prone body to give it an appraising look. After a few moments he let out a rasping cough as he addressed those surveying the battle. "The winner is Aburame Shino!"

The bug master spared no glance at his defeated opponent, the sound ninja Zaku, as he made his way back up the stairs to rejoin his fellow genin. His teammates were there at the top of the stairs to congratulate him on his victory.
"I'm glad... that you won, Shino-kun...!" Hinata exclaimed softly, pressing her figures together nervously. Shino inclined his head softly to convey his thanks.

"Yeah," Kiba agreed raucously. "That's showin'em what Team 8 can do!" From the safety of his jacket, Akamaru barked in agreement.

A few feet away, Ino let out a shuddering sigh. "Those bugs of Shino's are really creepy..."

Munching on his chips idly, Chouji chuckled thoughtfully. "They get the job though, don't they?"

The blonde beside him let out a squeal of discomfort.

A toothy grin stole across with Dog-nin's face as he watched the display board for the names of the next fight's participants. He could barely contain his excitement. "Man, I can't wait until it's our turn! We're gonna wipe the floor with our opponent, aren't we, boy?"

Akamaru barked once more.

"Make sure you can back up those words when it's your turn," Shino remarked.

"What's that?" Kiba growled, closing the distance between he and his bespectacled teammate. The taller boy didn't even flinch. "Don't go actin' all high and mighty just 'cuz you won your fight!"

Hinata hovered behind them, flushing in embarrassment. "Kiba-kun, Shino-kun, please don't argue...!"

Leaning against the railing a few feet away, Naruto tried in vain to hold back a smile. Just watching the three of them reminded her of her own team. 'Is that how we look when we bicker...?' she wondered absently. A full grin bloomed across her face as she tried to imagine Hinata bopping Kiba over the head for his antics. 'No way... Hinata's way too quiet and nice for that...' Her blue eyes shifted, falling onto Team 10 on the opposite side. 'But Ino... sheesh... Shikamaru, Chouji, boy I don't envy you guys one bit!'

"Why are you eating that crap? You should be paying attention to the fights!"

"But I'm sooo hungry!"

Naruto rolled her eyes in resigned amusement. 'That's our graduating class;' she thought to herself. 'The Rookie 9.' She let her gaze leave her classmates, falling on the three older genin standing at the far end of the platform. 'I guess this Gai-sensei's team from last year's graduating class...'

As if sensing her scrutiny, Neji glanced over at her narrowing his eyes in distaste. Resisting the urge to stick out her tongue, Naruto quickly turned her attention back to the fight below.

The Hyuuga scoffed.

Tenten glanced at him. "Is something wrong, Neji?" she asked.

White eyes left the blonde, focusing on his teammate before also turning back to the fight. "Hn, it's nothing."
The insulating tone behind his words did not go unnoticed by Naruto. 'Great...' she thought to herself with a mental groan. 'Another self-absorbed Sasuke... Are all top rookies such jerk-wads?'

Beside his teammates, Lee's focus was also on the enigmatic blonde. Though Sasuke had turned out to be the hero of the day back in the Forest of Death, the orange clad genin had also proven to be a capable ninja. He remembered his first altercation with the Uchiha, and how the blonde had come in between their blows. 'He was able to block my kick without budging... and then in the forest... the speed at which he moved...' He closed his eyes, grinning in excitement. This Chunin exam was going to be an exciting one indeed!

oooo

The battle between Misumi Tsurugi and Sabaku no Kankuro was quickly brought to a close when the Suna ninja unleashed his lethal puppet Karasu. The thing was hideous - all joints and sharp, poison-tipped implements - and though skillfully manipulated strands of chakra controlled its movements, the puppet seemed to have a mind of its own.

'Creepy,' Naruto thought to herself, watching as the black garbed ninja made his way back up the opposite stairs to join his teammates. Her eyes fell on Karasu, bundled up once more in its wrappings on its owner's back. She recalled her first encounter with the puppet master back when he'd accosted Konohamaru.

"You think I'm scared of you? I'll show you just what I'm capable of." ~

'Hn... I guess Cat-boy is a lot stronger than I thought... But what about his two teammates?' The blonde kunoichi was saying something that had a cocky grin spreading across his make-up covered face, while the other ninja... Her eyes fell on him only to find empty green eyes staring right back at her. She tensed in surprise.

Catching the movement out of the corner of his eye, Kakashi stared down at his student in curiosity.

Sakura followed her teacher's gaze, frowning at her teammate worriedly. "Naruto... what's the matter...?"

"Huh?" The blonde blinked. "Nothing, Sakura-chan, honest!"

"Oh, really?" Ino sidled up to the two of them, giving her fellow blonde an accusing glare.

Naruto continued blinking, an expression of honest confusion on her face. "Uhh, yeah...?"

The other kunoichi huffed, folding her arms across her chest. "So then what's the deal? What was your motivation - some convoluted scheme to get out of courtesan training?" Comprehension dawned on Naruto's face, but Ino was still going strong. "I know you, Chouji, and Shikamaru used to skip out on Iruka-sensei's class all the time - you're all a bunch of slackers, but this *really* takes the cake!"

"Ino--" Sakura scowled, clenching her hands at her sides. She froze when Naruto turned her gaze towards her.

"Sakura..." There was no 'nee-chan' this time. And with the wounded look in those blue eyes, Sakura was not surprised. "You told her...?"
Though Naruto had never specifically asked her not to tell anyone of her secret, Sakura felt a stab of guilt nonetheless. "No!" she exclaimed, before lowering her voice so not to attract the attention of the other Konoha teams. "She, Chouji, and Shikamaru saw by themselves... back in the Forest of Death while you were knocked out."

"Oh..."

"Your arm gonna be okay to fight?"

Blue eyes blinked at the Shadowmaster who was giving her a thinly veiled look of concern. Leave it to the shadow master to accept things so easily – anything else would be too troublesome, she supposed. Naruto grinned, glad to know that their friendship wouldn’t be affected. Another quick glance at Chouji indicated he felt the same way as his teammate. Her grin turned into a genuine smile.

"Nah, I’ll be fine…” Her injury had already healed itself thanks to her uncanny healing abilities – one of the few things involving her tenant that she didn’t mind. "It’ll take more than a little scratch to keep Uzumaki Naruto down, believe it!"

Chouji grinned.

Ino blinked a few moments, staring at her teammates and the blonde in front of her. "That’s it?” she gawked. "You guys are just gonna accept this. Are you ser--?"

Sakura rushed forward and grabbed her, dragging her through the double doors and out into the hall.

"Sakura-nee-chan?” Naruto blinked.

Shikamaru stared after them and shrugged. "I don’t even wanna know…”

"Get your hands off of me, Forehead Girl! Just what are you thinking grabbing me like that?"

Sakura stared down the other kunoichi, her green eyes glinting furiously. "I can’t believe you – shooting off your big mouth like that!"

Ino started at the venom in the girl’s voice, but recovered quickly. "What do you expect when you get a bomb dropped on you like that?” She gestured back to the double doors, behind which their teammates stood. "You can’t tell me you weren’t surprised when you found out. I mean, really, Uzumaki Naruto… a—"

"I know,” Sakura sighed heavily, remembering clearly her own reaction to the news. She also remembered the blonde’s expression after her subsequent outburst. She’d been hurt, but not surprised. It was as if she’d been expecting it.

‘Naruto… I’m so sorry…” Pushing the memories away, she stared down Ino once again. "I was surprised when I found out too, but I didn’t go shouting it to the whole world!"

"Well maybe you should have,” Ino countered, folding her arms. "Do you have any idea how
"Kakashi-sensei knows Naruto’s secret and he’s fine with it," she replied. "Besides, it’s Naruto’s business – you have no right to tell anybody about it!"

No right to… since when did Haruno Sakura care about what happened to dead last Naruto? When had they become such close friends? ‘Not that I care or anything…’ The blonde thought sullenly to herself. ‘Who is this girl and what has she done to Sakura?’ Calculating eyes studied her in silence a few moments. "Why are you so suddenly concerned about that faker?"

"Ino…"

So she was serious about this, was she? Ino smirked coyly, causing the pink-haired girl to tense in apprehension. "You want me to keep quiet?" she asked. "Fine, but it’ll cost you."

Sakura frowned. "Cost me what?"

Her smirk deepened. "Give up on Sasuke-kun."

Reeling back as she’d been struck, Sakura gaped in surprise. "What?!"

"You heard me," the blonde replied. "Those are my terms. You give up all romantic pursuit of Sasuke-kun – leaving him all mine –" Sakura twitched visibly at this. "Or I will walk through those doors right now and tell everyone about Naruto’s little cross-dressing escapade."

Sakura stared at her, eyes wide in disbelief. Was this really Ino…? The same girl who’d reached out to her all those years ago – was she really this awful…? "I… can’t believe you’d…"

Ino scoffed, resting her hands on her hips. "Hey, information is information… and it all comes at a price." She narrowed her eyes at the other girl. "You’re the one who set the stakes, Sakura, and I refuse to lose to you…"

Sakura remembered a day in the woods, the two of them staring each other down. A younger version of herself was placing an old worn ribbon in a equally younger stunned Ino’s outstretched hand.

~ "From now on, we’re rivals…" ~

It was true that she had seen her best-friend as a competitor for her crush’s attention, but there had been more to it than that. More than what the blonde could see. She’d accepted her challenge without batting an eye and from then on they had been friends no more. ‘Does winning Sasuke-kun mean that much to her…? He’s not an object, he’s a person – can’t you see that?!”

Still, Sakura did not want to turn Sasuke over to her. Those who abandon their teammates are worse than trash, Kakashi had told them that very first day. Knowing that, Sakura realized she couldn’t abandon Naruto either, especially when it was her fault things had been screwed up so badly. If she had been a better ninja, she wouldn’t have had to rely on Team 10’s help in the Forest of Death. Is she had been stronger, her teammates wouldn’t have gotten hurt in the first place.

~ "You shouldn't hafta worry about being on the frontlines, Sakura-chan," ~ Naruto had told her. ~ "You're still important to the team, no matter what." ~
"How's that?" ~ she had asked her.

The blonde had grinned as if the answer were obvious. "You're the brains behind our operation! With Sasuke as the skill and me as the strength, the three of us make up one complete ninja!" ~

Naruto… who had known that such a few simple words from the blonde would give her so much confidence?

"Look, Sakura-chan, all I really wanted was to be your friend." ~

Why…?

"Why not? You're really smart and really nice... most of the time." ~

Up until recently, Sakura couldn’t recall a time where she hadn’t had some insult to bestow upon the blonde. And yet she still looked upon her so favorably? Had she really been that starved for companionship?

"Besides, you've always been kinda my role model." ~

The blonde – who still managed to surprise and amaze her with the things she was capable of – saw strength in her that Sakura still wasn’t sure she believed was there. Whatever reasons she may have had, Sakura had promised herself that day that she would honor the friendship Naruto had bestowed on her. If not for that reason alone, she vowed she would do everything in her power to protect her.

'And if that means we'll be enemies all over again, Ino...' She frowned at the blonde who was still smirking at her. 'So be it.'

"Uh, guys?" The double doors opened and Chouji poked his head through, quailing under the fierce twin glares suddenly directed his way. Girls… sheesh.

"What is it, Chouji?" Ino asked impatiently. "Can’t you see we’re busy here?"

"They’re calling for you inside," the stocky boy answered nervously. "You’re up next!"

Ino started in surprise. "Really? Against who?" All three Leaf genin filed back into the auditorium, and both kunoichi were surprised to find all eyes on the board.

The names displayed on there were too clear to be misinterpreted.

Yamanaka Ino vs. Haruno Sakura.

"No way..." Ino’s mouth dropped, going slack. "Sakura—"

The other kunoichi shoved past her, making her way towards the stairs. "Out on the floor, Ino-pig," she ground out. Ino’s mouth shut with and audible ‘snap’. "You and I have a score to settle."

"Sakura-nee-chan..." Sakura glanced back at her teammate, feeling a boost of courage at the grin that spread across the blonde’s face. She may not have known the particulars of her and Ino’s relationship, but somehow she knew that this fight was important to her. "Kick ass."
She nodded, a grin threatening to spread across her own face. "I won’t lose."

Kakashi watched his two genin, his visible eye thoughtful.

oooo

By the time the two kunoichi reached the arena, Ino had recovered from her shock, her usual steadfast confidence back to normal. Facing off against Sakura? Pah…she couldn’t have asked for an easier match.

"So, Forehead," she drawled, giving the other girl an appraising look. So sure of herself – Ino’d fix that. "Come to a decision yet?"

Sakura frowned. "There’s no way I’m gonna give up Sasuke-kun to the likes of you, Ino-pig."

Shaking her head, Ino made a show of sighing resignedly before replying, "Well then, I’m just gonna have to let everyone kno—"

"And I’m not going to give up on Naruto either." Sakura’s eyes darkened. "‘Those who abandon their teammates are worse than trash’," she slowly eased herself into an opening taijutsu stance.

Ino did the same. "You’re in no position to lecture me, Sakura," she scoffed. "I know that speech just as well as you do, y’know." Her expression turned smug. "In case you’ve forgotten, I was the top kunoichi in our class."

‘So cocky…’ She’d been like that back in the Academy, Sakura realized. "And yet you didn’t learn a thing!" she spat. Ino’s eyes narrowed in response.

Hayate regarded the two girls in front of him, coughing quietly into a closed fist. ‘So, these two have history, huh? It’ll make for an interesting fight, at least.’ He raised his free hand into the air, drawing their attention to him along with everyone else in the auditorium. "Begin!"

Sakura turned from him, glaring at Ino once more. "I’m gonna fight you now, Ino…” she told her. "Not for Sasuke-kun, or for Naruto… but to prove to that I am stronger than you."

Rearing back slightly, Ino blinked in surprise. "You? Stronger than me?" The laugh died in her throat at the serious expression on the other girl’s face. A scowl rose to Ino’s face as she reached into weapons’ pouch. "I don’t think so!"

A kunai in hand, Sakura parried off the shuriken rushing towards her before hurling her own weapon at her opponent.

From his position on the balcony, Lee let out a loud whooping cheer. The scowl from his white-eyed teammate went unnoticed. "Woo hoo! Go, Sakura-san! You can do it!"

Watching as the two lashed out at each other, Shikamaru let out a groan. They weren’t showing any mercy. "Man… who would’ve thought those two would be paired off right off the bat…"

Their Jounin sensei, the equally laidback Sarutobi Asuma, chuckled as he took a drag from his ever-present cigarette. "Considering the history those two have, perhaps it’s for the best…"

"History…?" Team 8’s sensei, Yuuhi Kurenai, asked curiously.
"They used to be friends," Chouji answered, a handful of chips halfway to his mouth as he watched the two girls engage each other in hand to hand combat. "Best friends… ‘til they started competing for Sasuke’s attention…"

"Squabbling over the Uchiha…" Neji surveyed the fighting kunoichi as one might an annoying insect. "Pathetic…"

Ever an advocate for positive perceptions towards kunoichi, Tenten shook her head disbelievingly. "That can’t be all there is to it," she said. The Hyuuga gave her a doubtful look – granted only members of Team Gai could perceive it as such, as it looked completely expressionless to everyone else. "You can see it in how they’re fighting each other – it’s not just about a boy. It’s about pride."

"Ooh… please win, Sakura-san!" Lee exclaimed, clutching his hands tightly to his chest. "I could not bare the thought of you being hurt!"

"Have confidence in your young flower, Lee," Gai exclaimed, striking a pose that had all those in the vicinity grimacing in distaste. "If she draws strength from your passionate Spirit of Youth she cannot fail!"

"Yes, Gai-sensei!"

"Lee…!"

"Gai-sensei…!"

Eyes closed, Neji’s left brow had developed a slight tic.

"Gai-sensei, Lee…” Tenten began, only to pause when Sakura halted her attack, taking Ino’s half-hearted slap across the face.

The blonde stared at her, more surprised by Sakura’s actions than her own. "What the hell are you playing at?" she exclaimed.

"Cut the crap, Ino," Sakura hissed. "I told you – this isn’t a game!"

~ "Bet you thought this was all a game, ne? Wanted to impress some boy…?" ~

Ino watched her movements, gasping as her hands went to untie the hitai-ate on top of her head. "Sa-Sakura…"

In her mind’s eye, another Sakura faced her, holding out the Leaf headband for her inspection.

~ "See this hitai-ate, Ino-pig?" ~ she’d asked, her expression smug. ~ "It proves that I’m a kunoichi now." ~

Another version of herself was there, too, holding a hitai-ate of her own. ~ "In case you haven’t noticed, Forehead Girl, I’ve got one, too." ~

Memory Sakura smirked. ~ "But you don’t have Sasuke-kun on your team, do you?" ~ The memory version of herself glared. ~ "You’re just gonna have to face facts, Ino-pig. He’s all mine now!" ~
So smug… She couldn’t stand it! ~ "Yeah right! This isn’t over yet – there’s no way I’m gonna lose to you!" ~

The girl she’d taken under her wing tied her scarf in place, the metal plate displaying the symbol of leaf resting on the crown of her head as opposed to her forehead. ~ "See how I’m wearing this now?" ~ she’d asked, her eyes strangely serious. ~ "Once I pull this down over my forehead, it means that I’m finally at your level – and when that happens, I’m coming at you with everything I’ve got." ~

Sakura, at her level? Despite herself, she’d laughed as she tied her own scarf around her waist. ~ "I’ll be ready." ~

Mind shifting back to the present, Ino watched as Sakura pulled her head band down to cover her forehead. Almost mechanically, she did the same, drawing her hitai-ate from around her waist to tie around her head. "So, it’s like that, huh?" She slid back into a defensive stance. "Well, then go for it!"

"Fine!" Sakura tensed before for rushing towards her.

oooo

"Whoa!" Watching the speed and strength with which Sakura made her attacks, Naruto gaped in surprise. "How’s she doing that?"

‘Very nicely done, Sakura, looks like the training in Nami paid off…’ Kakashi shifted behind his remaining student, his eye creased in amusement. "Superb chakra control." At the meaningful look he sent her, the blonde merely stuck out her tongue. "She’s enhancing her speed and strength with her own chakra. She may not be able to keep it up for long given her small reserves, but as it is now she’s certainly giving Yamanaka-san a run for her money."

"And she’s not happy about it one bit," Chouji remarked, eyeing the thunderous expression on Ino’s face as she struggled to avoid the flurry of blows being directed her way.

Beside him, Shikamaru remained silent, his dark eyes watching their teammate. ‘What’re you gonna do, Ino…?’

Ino slid backwards to avoid the spin kick aimed at her chest, directing a furious glare at her attacker.

Sakura straightened up, body tensed to attack. "Give it up, Ino," she said. "There’s no way you can win. I’ve trained harder than you have."

‘The hell you have…’ "You think a couple months of training is gonna make you a better ninja than me?!" she hissed. "You wouldn’t even be here if not for me!"

Sakura paused, knowing her words to be true. When they had been younger, other children had picked on her, making fun of her pink hair and forehead. It was Ino who had extended her friendship, as well as her protection. It was because of her that she had found her confidence. Sakura had been, and would always be grateful, but until realizing her feelings for the enigmatic Uchiha Sasuke, she had always allowed the blonde to dictate her actions. Ino’s likes were her likes, Ino’s friends were her friends (even if they still made fun of her when the other girl wasn’t
present). Though she was much more confident than she had been when she was younger, she was still standing in Ino’s shadow, under her influence. It *was* because of Ino that Sakura had decided to become a ninja – she hadn’t wanted to be left behind.

But things were different now… "I can stand on my own now," Sakura said quietly. "I don’t need you anymore."

~ "From now on, we’re rivals…" ~

"Ha!" Despite her exclamation, Ino’s face held no humor. "You haven’t changed… You talk a big game, but look at how helpless you were in the forest." Sakura flinched. "Up until now you’ve hid behind the two of your teammates, letting them do all the work while you just stand by and watch."

Sakura remembered standing on the sidelines in Nami, as Sasuke and Naruto faced off against the Kirigakure nukenin, as well as Zabuza and Haku. Her mind then supplied images of the Forest of Death, Naruto and Lee sustaining injuries in their attempts to assist her.

~ "You shouldn’t hafta worry about being on the frontlines, Sakura-chan. You’re still important to the team, no matter what." ~

"You think you’re better than me because you have Sasuke on your team? You think playing the damsel makes you special?" Ino spat. "Guess what? In reality it just makes you weak – you’re just a plain girl playing Ninja, Sakura, and I’m gonna prove it to you right now!" Grasping her long blonde ponytail in one hand, she hacked it away with one quick swipe of her kunai, hurling the strands at Sakura with a scream of frustration.

The pink haired kunoichi stared at her in shock.

oooo

The Leaf Genin on the balcony shared similar expressions.

"Has she gone crazy?" Chouji screeched.

Asuma was frowning in worry. "She’s up to something…"

"Please be careful, Sakura-san…!" Lee wailed.

oooo

Unsure whether to be amused or disgusted, Sakura brushed the platinum blonde strands from her shoulders, staring at Ino in confusion. "What do you think you’re doing?" She moved forward to knock some sense into the girl only to find that her legs would not obey her command. Blonde hair glowing with chakra was wrapped tightly around her feet, holding her in place. "Wha…?"

"Can’t move, can you?" Ino was smirking at her. "You think you’re the only one who knows how to utilize chakra? You got cocky, Forehead, and now you’re going down."

Shikamaru’s eyes widened as his blonde teammate brought her hands up in a familiar hand sign. "No way…" His blood ran cold. "That’s that she’s doing?!"

"Huh?" Chouji blinked in confusion and worry. "What’s she up to, Shika…?"
"She used the hair to bind Sakura in a substitute for my family’s jutsu, Kagemane no jutsu…” He frowned darkly. "So that she can use her own jutsu…"

Catching on to his meaning, Asuma slapped a hand to his forehead and groaned. "You mean she’s really going to use—"

"Prepare yourself, Sakura!" Ino yelled out. "SHINTENSHIN!"

There was a beat of silence, and then both girls slumped to the ground.

Hayate blinked.

From above them on the opposite side of the auditorium, Kankurou gawked in disappointment. "Eh…? That was it…?"

Beside him, Temari smirked. "Doubtful. This fight’s far from over."

"Neechan…” Naruto called out worriedly, letting out a sigh of relief as Sakura slowly rose to her feet.

The pink-haired kunoichi glanced over at the unconscious blonde, a hand on her hip. Closing her eyes and smirking in a way very un-Sakura-like, she chuckled. "Well, how do you like that…” she sneered. "Not so confident now, eh, Forehead Girl?"

"What?!" Lee and Naruto squawked in unison.

"That’s the Shintenshin," Asuma replied, scratching his bearded chin uneasily. "Signature jutsu of the Yamanaka Clan. They’re called Mind-Walkers because that jutsu allows them to enter an opponent’s mind and take over control over their body."

"You serious?" Kiba screeched, not liking the idea of anybody walking around in his head. A guy had private thoughts that he wanted to keep just that – private! He glanced at Hinata, gulping nervously. The white-eye kunoichi thankfully remained oblivious.

"The Shintenshin’s got a downside," Shikamaru frowned, eyes still on the two kunoichi below. "The ninja casting the jutsu has to leave their own body in order to get it to work and they have to make sure that they don’t miss the target. Otherwise they’ll be left vulnerable to attack…”

"That sucks…” Tenten remarked. She preferred the direct approach to any of that subterfuge. Why go through all that fuss when a simple kunai was all you needed? She shrugged; to each his own. "Well, it doesn’t look like she missed."

"Then… does that mean that Ino… is Sakura now…?" Lee wondered, bottom lip trembling in worry. Neji fought not to roll his eyes. "What will become of my Beloved Sakura-san now?"

Ino, in Sakura’s body, chuckled. "Well, Sakura, as much as I’d just love to embarrass you in front of everyone, it’s high time I put an end to this fight once and for all." She moved the arm from its position at her hip, slowly raising it. "Now, be a good girl and forfeit—huh?" Her arm froze mid-air, refusing to budge. Ino suddenly found herself plunged into darkness. "What?"

*YOU THINK YOU CAN JUST COME IN HERE UNINVITED AND START CALLING
ALL THE SHOTS?* An angry voice echoed all around her. *I DON’T THINK SO!*

‘Sakura…?’ Ino’s brows furrowed in confusion. "But no… that’s impossible – she should be asleep!"

*SHE IS, THANKS TO YOUR LITTLE JUTSU,* the voice replied. *AND WITH HER ASLEEP, THAT LEAVES –ME– IN CHARGE!* Ino let out a scream as a large hand materialized out of nowhere, plucking her up off of the ground. *AND I DON’T WANT YOU HERE, SO BEAT IT!*

Hurled back into her own body by what she could only assume was Sakura’s subconscious mind it took Ino a few seconds to reorient herself before rising to her feet. "Damn it… stupid Forehead Girl…"

"Ah, so she’s back to normal," Kakashi remarked.

Naruto and Lee let out sighs of relief as Sakura shook her head, wide eyes blinking in confusion. "I’m me again!"

"What the hell was that, Sakura?” Ino exclaimed.

The pink-haired kunoichi blinked at her a few seconds before allowing a smirk to come to her face. "I guess you met Inner-Sakura," she said. "She’s just as tired of your crap as I am."

"You watch your mouth, Sakura!” Ino snapped, shaking with fury. "Or what?" she snarled right back. "We’re not gonna fall for your cheap tricks anymore!"

"You think I need tricks to finish you off?” Ino tensed, preparing herself to attack. "It’s time to finish this the old fashioned way!”

"Fine by me!"

The two kunoichi let out twin battle cries, rushing towards each other at tops speeds. Fists raised to strike, both blows met their targets head on and the two girls fell to the ground with a dull thud.

For several moments there was only silence.

"Are you kidding me?!” Kankurou exclaimed. "After all that… this is how it ends?!”

Temari only shrugged.

Hayate coughed quietly, giving each girl a once over before making his announcement. "A double knockout – neither participant is able to continue. I hereby declare this match a tie!"

"No way!” Naruto exclaimed.

"Sakura-saannnn!"

Exchanging looks briefly, the jounin instructors went down to the arena floor, collected their
unconscious students and bringing them back up to balcony to recover.

"They sure did go all out..." Asuma remarked.

"Yup," Kakashi agreed.

The bearded jounin grinned. "Makes me wonder how they'll react once they wake up and find out the battle was a tie."

"If I know Ino," Shikamaru replied. "She’s gonna be pissed..."

Chouji nodded in agreement.

Naruto glanced back at the two of them, propped up against the wall next to each other like two friends who’d fallen asleep over the same magazine. It was almost hard to believe they had been battling so fiercely only moments ago. ‘You two used to be such good friends... but here you are fighting over a boy whose only interest is in becoming strong enough to avenge his family.’ She frowned, remembering the cold look he had given Sakura once confronted with her concern for him.

~ "I'm only here to fight strong opponents. So stay out of my way." ~

And the look that he’d given her...? She fought the urge to shudder. ‘He’s an Avenger like he said... he doesn’t care about either of u—you...’

~ "We may be teammates now, but eventually it's gonna be every man for himself..." ~

~ "You and I are gonna face each other at one point or another, and when that time comes don't hold anything back." ~

‘Why would anybody find that attractive...?’ Not sure that she wanted to know the answer, Naruto turned away from them, blue eyes darkening slightly. She tried to push those dark thoughts away, letting out a sigh. "Girls can be so troublesome..."

Shikamaru smirked at her. "Coming from you, that sounds so wrong..."

She blinked at him, "Why’s that?"

"Why do you think?" At her blank expression, the shadow master resisted the urge to slap a hand to his forehead. "Don’t start acting all dumb now!"

"Huh...?"

Behind them, Kakashi closed his eye in an amused grin.

oooo

The return to consciousness came quickly to Sakura, along with the pain of her injuries. Remembering that she’d just been engaged in a fight, she jumped up, looking about wildly in surprise.

"'Bout time you two woke up," Asuma replied.
Sakura glanced to her left to see Ino beside her with a similar expression of confusion on her face. However, once they both realized it, they turned away from each other in a huff.

Ino broke away from the non-stare-off first. "So, what’d we miss?"

"Well," Asuma drawled. "Tenten vs. that fan girl from Suna. Tenten lost. Oh, Shikamaru and Chouji both had their fights, too."

"You mean I missed them?" Surprisingly, Ino actually looked distraught. "How’d they do?"

"Chouji lost," Shikamaru said from his position leaning against the wall. "His Meat Tank wasn’t quite enough against that Oto-nin’s sound attack…"

"He’s all right, isn’t he?" Sakura asked. The blonde glanced at her before turning her attention back to her teammate.

"He’ll be fine," Asuma replied.

"That’s good… And what about you, Shika?" The shadow master raised an eyebrow. "How did you do?"

"He won, believe it or not," their instructor said with a grin.

The blonde kunoichi gaped in surprise. "No way! Really, Shika!" She jumped up, hugging him. "That’s awesome!"

Shikamaru glanced away, blushing slightly. "How troublesome…"

Sakura smirked at their antics a few moments before turning her attention to her own teammate only to find that she was surprisingly missing. "Kakashi-sensei?" Her teacher glanced at her, his eye questioning. "Where’s Naruto?"

"Down there." He pointed to the arena floor, where the blonde stood facing her opponent.

The display board behind them read **Uzumaki Naruto vs. Inuzuka Kiba**.

Hinata clenched her hands to her chest, biting her lip in worry. ‘**Naruto-kun… please be careful…**’

Asuma lit another cigarette, throwing the other Jounin instructors a curious glance. "So, who do you think’s gonna win?"

"Are you joking?" Kurenai snorted. "Kiba is, no question."

"Why?" Asuma asked. "Because Naruto’s the lowest ranking ninja in his class?"

‘**Really…?**’ Lee wondered. ‘**So then he’s like me…?**’

Gai glanced at his student and then at Kakashi. "Well, Kakashi?" he prodded. "What would you say are your student’s chances?"

Asuma and Kurenai leaned forward, curious as to what the gray-haired jounin would say in defense
of his student.

Kakashi paused, rubbing the back of his neck thoughtfully. "Don’t know..." he answered. The other three jounin nearly fell over in disbelief. How could he not know...?! "The only person who really knows what Uzumaki Naruto can do is... Uzumaki Naruto." His visible eye focused on the blonde below. ‘But I am curious... will you finally show us what you’re capable of...?’

"Be careful, Naruto!" Sakura called out.

Hayate glanced at the two genin in front of him, bringing his hand down in a sharp motion. "Begin!"

End Chapter 10

Chapter End Notes

Alright, last chapter for now. I really need to go to bed.

For more, you can always look me up on Deviantart under the name watashi-no-nindo!
Chapter 11a: One and the Same

Chapter Summary

Now it's Naruto's turn in the ring. Does she have what it takes to proceed in the exams?

Chapter 11

Staring down at the smaller blonde in front of him, Kiba couldn't keep the grin from his face. He patted Akamaru on the head, setting the small dog on the ground with a laugh. "Paired against the class loser, man," he cackled gleefully. "I can't believe our luck!"

Naruto's eyes narrowed slightly. "Luck?"

The Dog ninja glanced over at her. "Yeah, that's right," he replied. "Beating you is gonna be a cinch!"

Naruto shifted, tucking her hands into her pockets in a nonchalant stance. "You think so, Dog Boy?"

His grin widened. "I know so..." He spread his feet, arms raised to strike. "In fact, I'll prove it to you!" Without any warning, he rushed towards her. "Let's go, Akamaru!"

The larger boy's speed surprised her, but Naruto braced herself for his oncoming assault. However, right before he struck, he vanished right before her. She blinked in surprise, only to be rammed into from the side.

"NARUTO!" Sakura's eyes were wide with horror as she watched her teammate sail across the floor and slide to a stop.

Hinata whimpered.

The other ninja present murmured in disappointment.

Ino scoffed in surprise. "Man, I knew it was gonna be quick, but not that quick!"

Resting his chin in the palm of his hand against the railing, Kankurou let out a low groan of frustration. "That's it? Now I feel bad for letting that punk get the drop on me before!"

Below them, Kiba smirked at the blonde's still form. "Ha! Told ya!" he laughed. "There's no way--eh, what...?"

With a low groan, Naruto slowly got to her feet, shaking her head to clear it. "You think a little love-tap like that is gonna finish me off?" She gave a grim smirk back at her opponent. "Yeah right, I've had little old ladies hit me harder than that!"

The Leaf Jounin tensed slightly.

"Naruto-kun..." Hinata whispered.
Kiba bristled at the insult. "What's that?! You wanna play it rough?"

"Come on then, Kiba," Naruto grinned. "Do what you gotta do - prove to me that your bite's as bad as your bark!"

He bristled once again, his face reddening. Who did this kid think he was, making fun of him? He growled in annoyance. "Make jokes if you want to, it's all you're good at!"

Naruto watched as he rushed her once again, bringing her hands into her favorite hand sign. "Kage Bunshin no jutsu!"

Kurenai blinked in surprise. "What?"

The Dog ninja didn't stop his attack, choosing instead to rush her head on before feinting away like once before. However, before he could strike, a second Naruto tackled him from the side, knocking him to the ground.

"That clone..." Shino's monotonous tone held a hint of surprise. "It was solid."

"Way to go, Naruto!" Sakura cheered.

Hearing her cheer, Naruto grinned. Turning her gaze back to Kiba, her grin turned slightly feral. "You might think I'm stupid, Kiba," she said. "But only a real doofus would use the same trick twice and expect it to work."

"Yeah," the Naruto-clone jeered. "Who's the *real* blockhead here, me or you?"

"I'll show you," He gestured to Akamaru, and the small animal hopped onto his shoulders with an obedient yip. After feeding him a Soldier pill, Kiba henge'd the dog into another version of himself, primed and ready to go. "Let's go, Akamaru!"

Both Naruto and her clone yelped as the two Kibas rushed towards them. Quick reflexes enabled the blonde kunoichi to duck the clawed swipe aimed at her head, but it was only through her Kage bunshin's efforts that she was spared a blow from behind. The clone yanked her out of the way of Kiba-Akamaru's strike, taking the hit itself and poofing out of existence.

"What'cha gonna do now, runt?" Kiba jeered. "It's just you now."

Naruto righted herself, staring at the other nin with steely blue eyes. "What'd you call me?"

He grinned. "You heard me... you're a runt... a puny, no-talent ninja--"

~ "What right does some talentless riff raff have to look down on one of the greatest Kekkei Genkai holders your village has to offer?" ~

"...Who can't even manage a decent Henge let alone beat me!" Kiba crouched, preparing for another lunge. "You're a joke!"

Naruto growled in frustration. "You shut your mouth!" Crouching down, she slammed her palm flat against the ground. It glowed brightly with chakra as she yanked it upwards - as did the huge hunk of floor she pulled up with it. Hefting it in her arms, she hurled it at the Dog ninja with all of her might. "I am NOT a RUNT!"

Staring at the fight in disbelief, Shikamaru shook his head in dismay. "Of all the things that could have pissed you off, the 'runt' comment is the one you take offense at?" He let out a groan.
"Naruto, you *are* a doofus..."

"Still..." Ino stared at the hole left in the aftermath of the blonde's tirade. "I've never seen anybody use an attack like that before..." She glanced over at Sakura. "What's it called?"

Sakura didn't have a clue. "Beats me..." She recalled the report Sasuke and Naruto had given about their fight against Haku. 'Naruto said she used chunks of cement to break through Haku's mirrors...' She frowned thoughtfully. 'Is it possible that the force of her thrust combined with concrete was too much for the mirror to withstand?" Her eyes widened another sudden thought. 'Did Naruto... create her own jutsu...?'

"Impressive..." Lee awed, watching as the blonde hurled another volley of rocks at Kiba. "It appears that there is more to Naruto than we first expected..."

'IIndeed,' Kakashi thought to himself. Though Naruto had described to him exactly what she had done to break through Haku's Ice Mirrors, it was definitely another thing to see it first hand. 'Not exactly classy... but you gotta give her points for creativity.'

Kiba dodged another hunk of cement, letting out a raucous laugh. "You're wasting your time!" he exclaimed. "We're way too fast to get hit by some dumb old rock!

Realizing the truth in his words, Naruto paused her assault only to get kicked down by Kiba-Akamaru from behind. She hit the ground with a yelp, narrowly rolling out of the way of being stomped by the original Kiba. 'Crap...' She leapt upwards, flipping up and out of the path of another clawed swipe. Naruto's size and agility usually helped her evade attacks by larger enemies, but this time was proving to be a deviation from the norm. 'Kiba's a lot faster than I expected him to be...' she thought to herself. 'Alone I could probably take'im, but with Akamaru hopped up on that soldier pill...' Her eyes narrowed slightly. 'Gotta split'em up!'

Kiba lunged towards her, grazing her shoulder lightly. She winced at the pain, but didn't cry out. "You can play tough all you like, Tiny," Kiba grinned. "But it's time to take you out!"

"Well, Dog Breath, you can sure try!" Naruto produced several small balls from her weapons pouch. Hurling them to the ground, the two them were quickly consumed within a large cloud of smoke.

Asuma let out a short chuckle. "Smart move, kid."

"Not smart enough," Kurenai smirked.

Surrounded by thick gray smoke, Kiba let out a loud laugh. "You think a little smoke screen is gonna stop us?" he called out, knowing the blonde could hear. "I'm an Inuzuka - with my senses as honed as they are, I don't need to see you - I know exactly where you are!"

Crouched against the wall with chakra, Naruto let a devious grin spread across her whiskered face. 'Same here!'

For as long as she could remember, Naruto had always been in possession of keener than normal senses. Whether this was due to the Kyuubi she never knew, but given the fact that she was the self-proclaimed Prankster King (Queen) of Konoha, such abilities had proven time and again to be very useful. However, in all her time as a genin, she'd never realized just how useful until meeting Councilwoman and ex-ninja, Iwano Miyako. Upon meeting her, Naruto had never dreamed that she would take such a liking to the woman - and vice versa - but the old woman was unlike anyone she'd ever come across...
Iwano Miayko's slim hand rested securely on Naruto's shoulder as the small blonde lead them along the forest path. Though the younger girl kept her eyes on the dirt path, she listened with rapt attention to all the sounds around her.

"Anything?" Iwano-san asked. The blonde tilted her head, straining to discern all the sounds around her. After a few seconds she let out a small sound of frustration. Iwano smiled. "Your teammates are very close by."

Naruto blinked up at her in surprise. "You can hear them with all the other noise?"

"I can sense them," Iwano-san answered. "Why, I wouldn't be a good ninja if I couldn't." The blonde pouted, and though she couldn't see it, the older woman chuckled in amusement. "As you gain more experience, you'll learn to sense the chakra signatures of other ninja."

The blonde frowned thoughtfully. "But can't you disguise your chakra... suppress it?"

"Very good, Uzumaki-kun!" Iwano-san grinned. "Yes, you can do both of these things - with the proper skill and practice. However, any good tracker can find their target without having to sense their chakra."

"How's that?"

"Well, you're aware of the 6 senses, yes?"

She may have deliberately missed a great number of classes in the Academy, but Naruto made sure she knew the basics - the 6 Ninja Senses being among those basics. "Yeah... there's touch, taste, smell, sight, sound, and chakra, right?"

"Right again! You're a real smart kid, Uzumaki-kun!" Surprised at the praise, the blonde blushed heavily. "Although I'm sure you know this, the eyes can be fooled, but it is very difficult to disguise your smell or your sound."

"Your sound...?"

"Everyone has a distinct sound..." Iwano-san's sightless blue eyes closed. "When you are blind like I am, you have to learn to determine certain things about people using your remaining senses. I've spent years honing this ability..." She reopened her eyes, turning them in Naruto's direction with a kind smile. "But I'm willing to bet you're a natural, yes?"

Naruto blushed even deeper than before, scratching her head absently. "Well, I've got a pretty good nose..." It had certainly gotten her out of a lot of scrapes when she'd had flee Jounin and ANBU following execution of a particularly devious prank.

"Well then," Iwano's grin turned mischievous. "Put it to work! I guarantee it'll never let you down!"

oo End Flashback oo

Naruto gazed out into the thick smoke and, despite being unable to see an inch in front of her face, grinned a wide fox-grin. Inuzuka Kiba may have been even more in tune with his senses, but Naruto was a natural prankster.

'Kiba's been with Akamaru since I can remember,' she thought to herself, straining to hear any sign...
of her opponent(s). 'So I'm willing to bet they think alike.' Animals were single minded creatures, after all. She chuckled. 'Dog-boy isn't gonna know what hit him...'

Without warning, Kiba emerged from the smoke behind her, his fist raised to strike. A wide toothy grin was nearly splitting his face in two. "You're makin' this way too easy!"

Eyes wide, Naruto made her move.

oooo

Hinata's entire body had been tense in anxiety. Granted, it usually was - but this case was entirely different. Uzumaki Naruto - her idol, her role model, her crush - was currently engaged in a fight against one of her very own teammates. Her emotions were very conflicted - on the one side, Naruto was a person she had always looked up to, a person she drew strength from (however oblivious he might be to that fact) when she found a situation too difficult for her to handle on her own. However, Kiba was also someone important to her. Kurenai-sensei had always instructed Team 8 to lookout for each other, and although Hinata considered herself too weak to properly look after anyone, Shino and Kiba had done just that. They looked after her, protected her, encouraged her... Kiba more vocally, of course.

'Kiba-kun has always been so kind to me...' she thought. 'In some ways he reminds me of Naruto-kun...' She trailed off of that thought, her cheeks darkening in mortification. She shouldn't be thinking such things. Kiba wasn't Naruto!

At least Kiba pays attention to you, a little voice in her head jeered. I bet Naruto doesn't even know you exist!

'That's probably true,' Hinata told herself, crestfallen. Any attempts she'd made at talking to the blonde had failed, usually at the result of her losing her nerve. This of course, always led her to feel even more sorry for herself. 'And yet Kiba-kun was always there with Akamaru to cheer me up...' She blushed again, shaking her head. 'I'm so confused! I don't know which one to cheer for!'

Chouji leaned over the railing, trying to peer into the thick smoke below. He squinted, scratching his head. "Was that Naruto or the dog...?"

"Who knows... that kid always was a squeaky thing..."

The Leaf Jounin peered into the smoke, waiting to see who would emerge the victor.

After a few moments, the outer most rim of smoke began to dissipate, revealing Kiba with a triumphant grin on his face. A few seconds later, Akamaru - back in his original form - appeared, dragging an unconscious Naruto by the back of her jacket. Coming to a stop, the dog sat down on the blonde's chest, letting out a cheerful 'yip'.

"No!" Sakura cried out.

"It's over," Ino said with a sigh.

Kiba turned to his partner, his grin widening. "Way to go, Akamaru!" he laughed as he walked over towards them. He reached forward to give the dog a congratulatory pat on the head. "I knew that runt wouldn't stand a chance - eh?" Without warning, Akamaru jumped forward, sinking his little teeth deep into Kiba's arm.

From the balcony, the Konoha genin started in surprise. "What?!"
It took Kiba several seconds to realize what had happened before he reacted. "Akamaru...?!" He flailed his arm, forcing his ninken to release him. "What the heck has gotten into you?!

The dog sailed up into the air, flipping over to land nimbly several feet away. Once its feet touched the ground, it vanished with a loud 'pop!', leaving an orange-clad blonde in its place. Said blonde let out a 'bleech!' wiping her mouth furiously with a wrapping-covered hand. "You taste awful, Dog-boy!" she exclaimed. "Shower much?"

Reddening slightly, Kiba glared back at him with a growl. "You?! How...?" He could have sworn it was the blonde he'd attacked in the smoke. Had that been a clone? He glanced back at where Akamaru had dragged what he thought was the original blonde only to find an unconscious Akamaru in her place. "Akamaru!" He rushed over to him. "What happened?"

"You let your guard down, that's what!"

At the sound of his opponent's voice rapidly getting closer to him, the Dog-nin whirled back around to Naruto almost on top of him ready to deliver a blow. With quick reflexes, he narrowly avoided the attack, flipping out of the way. "Wha...?" Naruto doubled back, coming at him with a swinging kick that he just managed to duck. He didn't understand it... back in the Academy, Naruto had been a terrible student! He'd skipped class, sucked at bunshin no jutsu and henge, but yet here he was producing *Kage* bunshin that had not only managed to fool his, but also Akamaru's, nose! 'Akamaru...!' He glanced around wildly for his partner. "He was just... where is Akamaru?"

"Pay attention!" Naruto appeared out of the smoke behind him, landing a solid kick that sent him flying upwards into the air. A wild grin stole across her face as she jumped up after him. "Cuz I'm only gonna say this once..."

Kiba's eyes could only widen in shock as two clones appeared out of the smoke behind her, closing in on him as well. Between the three of them, they began landing blows that had him volleying back and forth like a ball in the Academy play yard.

"I am not, nor will I ever be, a Dead Last loser!" Clone #1 grinned at him, fisting him in the gut.  "And I am NOT a runt!" Clone #2 grabbed him by the ankle, spinning him into the clutches of two new clones.

Together, Naruto and each of her clones each took a turn at him, calling out as their blows connected. "U-ZU-MA-KI RENDAN!"

One final blow sent Kiba slamming into the tiled floor below, a crater forming beneath him. The four shadow clones vanished, leaving the original Naruto behind as she approached his still form. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto," she replied quietly, staring down at him. "The future Hokage, believe it!"

Kiba stared at her a few seconds in awe before he let out a soft groan, swiftly falling into unconsciousness.

'Well,' Naruto scratched her head, staring into the thick smoke that remained. *That takes care of that...*  A fifth and final clone emerged out of the mist, carrying a tied and muzzled Akamaru in its arms. It placed the dog in original's arms before popping out of existence with a grin. Studying the animal a few moments, Naruto sat it down next to its owner before glancing back up at Hayate curiously.

For a few moments, Hayate could only stare in awe. Of all the things he had expected to happen,
this was not it. Slowly he raised an arm in the blonde's direction. "Winner... Uzumaki Naruto!"

Sakura let out a loud cheer. "Yahoo! Way to go, Naruto!"

"Yes!" Lee clenched his fists in excitement. "That was an excellent battle!"

"Indeed!" Gai agreed.

"No way..." Ino exclaimed, stunned. "No way that just happened..."

Hinata's pale eyes were wide with shock as well. "Na-Naruto-kun... beat Kiba-kun...?"

Shino stared down at the arena, adjusting his sunglasses slightly. Though he, too, was surprised at the fight's outcome, his expression did not show it. "Kiba was cocky and overconfident," he said quietly. "He not only underestimated his opponent, but he relied too heavily on Akamaru in combat and Naruto exploited that..."

Kurenai stared, forcing herself to keep her jaw from dropping. Every word Shino said was true. She'd always known Kiba had shared a close bond with his ninken, but she had never expected that Naruto would try to capitalize on that fact... and succeed. To be able to fool an Inuzuka's nose... who had ever heard of that?

"I imagine Naruto allowed Kiba to land those blows in order to get his scent," the bug master went on. "He let him believe he had the upper hand, and once that happened he ceased to rely on his senses and fell right into his trap."

'Naruto-kun...' Hinata thought in awe.

Naruto was now kneeling down beside Kiba, trying to console Akamaru who seemed to be very upset at his master's loss. "Don't be like that, Akamaru..." she pleaded. "I'm sorry I had to rough your owner up a bit, but you gotta admit he was being a jerk..."

Akamaru let out a little mumbling growl, but since Naruto wasn't fluent in dog-speak, she had no idea what he was saying. Instead, she reached forward, scratching behind his ear in that one spot all dog's seem to enjoy. She grinned. "There now, no hard feelings, right?" Eventually Akamaru let out a consenting bark that had a grin spreading across her face.

After a few moments passed, the medics came out and set about placing the unconscious genin on a stretcher. Realizing her time was done, Naruto edged away and made her way back up the stairs.

Watching her approach, Hinata felt a race of fear. He was coming right towards her...now was her golden chance! As the blonde reached the last step, Hinata took a step towards him, fumbling for her pocket. 'Now, Hinata! Don't back away now!' "Na-na-na-naruto-kun!"

The blonde stopped, looking up with blinking blue eyes. "Hm? Hinata...?"

'Yes! He knows my name!' Using the adrenaline the joy caused by that revelation had created, Hinata grasped a small jar out of her pocket, thrusting it in the blonde's direction. "H-here!" she exclaimed. "I-It's for you... f-for your injuries...!

'Hinata...' Kurenai watched the exchange from a distance, eyes wide in surprise. She'd always known her student had had a crush on the blonde, but she'd never expected her to act on it. It seemed the day was full of surprises...

Naruto stared at the jar of ointment before giving the pale-eyed girl a smile. "Thanks, Hinata," she
replied. "But you know what would be great? You should give that stuff to Kiba - he probably could use it a lot better than me." Hinata blinked and then 'eeped' when the blonde leaned towards her, stage-whispering conspiratorially. "Besides, teammates gotta stick together, ne?"

'Naruto-kun... you're so kind... thinking of others before yourself...' Hinata smiled, nodding enthusiastically. "Right!" Feeling bold, she took off down the steps towards her fallen teammate, still smiling all the way.

From several feet away, Neji watched her go with a deep scowl etched on his face. 'Still not a care in the world... eh, Hinata...?'

oooo

"Kiba-kun!"

Kiba blearily opened his eyes to see a pale eyed angel staring down at him. Upon realizing it was his female teammate, he blushed in surprise. "Hinata...?" What was she doing here? Shouldn't she have been congratulating her crush, Naruto?

The Hyuuga heiress was kneeling down beside his stretcher, her face etched with her concern for him. Having his eyes upon her with such honest surprise caused her to blush heavily. "W-will you be all right, Kiba-kun...?"

'She's worried... about me...?' He grinned. "Eh, I'll be fine... Me an' Akamaru will be up in fighting form again in no time flat, just you watch!"

Hinata smiled at him and his stomach did little flip-flops. "I'm glad. You fought very well..." She held up the ointment jar, placing it gently in his hands. "Use this to help with your injuries..."

He blushed even harder than before, though it was hard to tell with all the bruising. Naruto really had done a number on him. "Thanks, Hinata..." He stared down at the jar a few moments before his expression turned serious. "You be careful out there..." She blinked at him. "You know, there are a lot of heavy hitters out there left, like that Sand guy..."

Hinata paled and nodded. They had seen what he was capable of in the Forest of Death. What he had done to that team from Amegakure... She shuddered to even remember it. Her pale eyes ventured up to the balcony only to find eyes similar to her own beating back down on her. She gulped nervously. "And there's N-Neji..."

Kiba jerked at the name, wincing slightly before gazing back up at her sternly once more. "If you get paired up against him, don't fight..." She blinked at him in surprise. "You know how he feels about you - who knows what he'll do..."

"But... Kiba-kun..."

"All right, we need to leave now..." The medic-nin lifted the stretcher, carrying Kiba away.

"Don't do it, Hinata!" he called out. "It's not worth it!"

Hinata stood, watching as he was carried away. She gulped again, clutching the material of her jacket. 'I'm sorry, Kiba-kun...' she thought to herself. 'But I can't back down... I can't because I know he wouldn't...' She glanced back up at the auditorium, focusing in on the blonde who was talking animatedly to the other genin close enough to pay attention. 'Right... Naruto-kun...?'

"Hinata!" The alarm in Kurenai's voice had the heiress' eyes automatically going to the display
board. Even before laying eyes on it she knew what it would display.

**Hyuuga Neji vs. Hyuuga Hinata.**

She gulped. She wouldn't back down. She wouldn't run away. She'd heard the blonde say it dozens of times. 'That is my nindo' he would say. From this day on, it would be hers as well.

Gai stared at the display board, a worried frown stretching across his face. He turned to give a warning to his student, but the prodigy was already on his way down the stairs with a dark smirk on his face.

Naruto watched him go, a confused frown on her face. She'd recognized that look as one that didn't bode well for the Hyuuga heiress. "I don't get it..." Gai and Lee turned their attention to her. "What's with the tense atmosphere all'a sudden?"

"I'm sure you're aware," Lee began slowly. "That Hinata-san and Neji are members of the same family, the Hyuuga Clan."

Naruto hadn't been, but she didn't bother to correct him. "Is that why they don't want to fight?" she asked instead.

"Quite the contrary," Gai answered. "They may be family, but there is no love between them." He placed a hand on the railing, clutching it tightly. "The Hyuuga clan is divided into two parts... the Main and the Branch family."

"Hinata-san comes from the Main family," Lee explained. "Who see themselves as the *true* Hyuuga, whereas the Branch family, from which Neji heralds, is seen as and treated as subservient to them."

"That's awful!" Sakura gasped.

Kurenai only frowned.

"No way!" Naru pounded the railing, her eyes dark. "I don't believe that Hinata would do that! She would never treat anyone like a slave - let alone a family member!"

"It doesn't matter to Neji," the female jounin finally replied. "As far as he's concerned, Hinata is a physical representation of everything he despises about the Main family."


"Gai," Kurenai gazed at the taijutsu master, her fists clenched at her sides. "We can't let this fight take place..."

"I agree with you..." he frowned. "But you and I both know that neither of us has the power to stop it." He gazed at the two genin currently facing each other below on the stadium floor. Neji looked as if he might devour the girl whole whereas Hinata looked about ready to faint at any given moment. The fight hadn't even begun and he was already tearing into her! He sighed heavily. "One of them will have to forfeit."

Lee shook his head. "Neji will do no such thing."

"Then Hinata...?" Ino gazed down at the pair, feeling sympathy for the terrified girl. She wouldn't
have wanted to be in her shoes either.

"Forfeit nothin'!" Naruto slammed her fists against the railing again, the metallic clanging drawing everyone's attention to her. She ignored them, leaning over the railing. "Hinata!" she hollered. "Don't you dare back down! You hear me?!"

Sakura stared at her teammate in awe, surprised at her vehemence. "Naru--"

"--to-kun..." Hinata blinked owlishly up at the balcony, her eyes riveted on the blonde.

"You're nothing like those stuffed shirt tightwads in the Main family!" the blonde railed. "Prove to him that you're your own person! Kick that jerk's ass!"

Neji ripped his attention from Hinata, scowling at Naruto.

Released from his pinning stare, Hinata felt a surge of relief as well as courage at the blonde's words. A timid smile skirted across her face. 'Thank you... Naruto-kun...' As Neji turned back to her, she released her jacket that she had been clutching at so desperately, running her hands through the signs that would activate her family's kekkei genkai, the doujutsu Byakugan. Ignoring Neji's surprised scowl, she slowly eased herself into the first stance of the Jyuuken, the Hyuuga clan's style of taijutsu. "Shall we begin this fight," she asked softly. "Neji-niisan?"

Neji's activation of the Byakugan required no hand signs, which further proved how much stronger than her she was. However, she didn't flinch as he too slid into a similar Jyuuken stance. "As you wish, Hinata-sama."

Just looking at the two of them Hayate knew this fight wouldn't go as smoothly as the last. However, having know choice he raised his arm, bringing it down in a harsh swing. "Begin!"
Chapter 11b: To Have a Dream

Chapter Summary

Just how far are you willing to go to achieve your dreams?

Chapter 11

There were a few tense moments of silence before the two Hyuuga, representatives of both Main and Branch families, rushed towards each other. There were no loud exclamations, no battle cries, only two genin meeting each other head on. They stayed within close range of each other, striking with hands aglow with chakra. With each blow blocked, opposing chakra crashed against each other, filling the air with their tense energies.

Naruto had never seen anything like it. "Whoa..."

"As cool as it looks," Ino remarked. "They're not really landing any blows."

Beside her, Lee nodded slightly. "That's the Jyuuenken," he replied. "A style of taijutsu used solely by the Hyuuga clan." The other genin turned to him, listening in on his impromptu lecture on his teammate's technique. "The object is not to land a physical blow. With their Byakugan allowing them to view the chakra pathways of the human body, Hyuuga ninja use the Jyuuenken to force their own chakra into their opponent's tenketsu points, closing it off."

"That's what they're doing?" Sakura awed. To close off certain tenketsu points in the body, like the arms or legs, could result in loss of motor skills or even paralysis. However, closing off a point near the heart or brain... "That's dangerous... what if they miss? Or apply too much chakra?"

"It's unlikely," Gai remarked, watching the two fighters like a hawk. "Because the Byakugan is so integral to their style, all Hyuuga are trained from a young age to have precise chakra control..."

The pink-haired kunoichi nodded in understanding. "That's amazing..." She had thought she had possessed stellar chakra control. And yet timid Hinata... "She's so good...!"

Lee frowned slightly. "But Neji is better..."

True enough, moments later Hinata let out a cry of pain as she was knocked to the ground by the older boy.

"Hinata!" Naruto and Sakura cried out in unison.

Neji eased out his attack stance, staring down at the girl with disdain. To think she was the Heiress of their clan... "Stop this foolishness and surrender." he frowned. "You're weak... You don't stand a chance against me - you know it."

Letting out a soft whimper at his words, Hinata shuddered as she struggled to rise. "Maybe so..." Her knees buckled slightly but she held herself up. "But I will never give up... I will never run
away..." She straightened her back, shifting her body back into a Jyuuken stance. "That is my nindo."

Up in the stands, Kakashi's visible eye fell on his blonde student, remembering her utter similar words back during their mission in Nami no Kuni. 'Well now... looks as if Naruto's got a little admirer...'. His eye closed thoughtfully in a grin. 'Wonder if she knows...'

The Hyuuga prodigy scoffed. "It's your choice." His eyes narrowed when the girl flinched, but did not back down. "From here on I won't hold back!" He rushed towards her, trailing chakra behind him.

Ino let out a gasp of surprise. "He's as good as Sasuke-kun!"

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. "I'm just glad I didn't get paired up against him..." He closed his eyes, scratching his chest absently. "It would've been way too troublesome..."

"Neji is indeed a strong opponent," Lee agreed. He stared at the Hyuuga, wrapped hands clenching the railing in front of him. "Some day I hope to be strong enough to defeat him in combat."

Whipping her gaze from the fight, Naruto gawked at him in surprise. 'Not even Lee's strong enough to beat him?!' she wondered. 'Just who is this guy?'

Unbeknownst to them, Hinata continued valiantly against her cousin, struggling to match him blow for blow. Beads of nervous sweat trickled down her face, veined Byakugan charged with chakra and focused on her opponent. 'I can do this... she repeated to herself as a mantra. 'I know I do this...' Neji aimed a blow at her side and she stepped to the side to avoid it, spotting an opening in his defense. Without hesitation, Hinata rushed towards it. 'Neji-niisan, I will not lose to you!'

Neji gasped in pain and surprise as his timid little cousin rammed a chakra charged hand into his side, knocking him back. 'Impossible!'

Hinata was just as surprised as he was. She stared at him, gawking. "I... did it...? I did it!" She let out a little manic giggle.

Kurenai leaned forward, red eyes wide with worry. "Hinata, don't lower your guard!"

Unfortunately, the damage was already done. Furious at the thought that he had allowed her to injure him, fueled by anger, Neji rushed towards Hinata and delivered a chakra charged blow directly to her chest. The pale girl let out a gasp of pain, hurtling backwards and crashing to the ground.

"HINATA!" Naruto screamed.

Letting out a scoff of derision, Neji turned his attention to Hayate. "Call the match, Proctor," he called. "She can't do anything else--"

"W-wait..." Hinata struggled to her feet once more, breathing raspily. "I... I'm not done..."

'How's that possible...?' Ino thought to herself, watching with horror in her eyes. Byakugan, Jyuken, or whatever, she remembered the girl Hinata had been back in the Academy. Timid, insecure, too scared to do much of anything other than stand back and watch. There was no way a girl like her could still keep fighting - especially after taking a blow like that. 'What is it that's
driving her...? How's she keep getting up...?

There was a movement and a flash of orange out of the corner of her eye. "That's right, Hinata! You can do it!"

The Mind-walker glanced at the other blonde, blue eyes light in anxiety at the scene playing itself out beneath them. 'Is it her...?' she wondered. Naruto had been cheering Hinata on since the beginning of the fight even though the two of them weren't friends as far as she knew. 'Is she the one bringing out this determination in Hinata...?' She paused, remembering the conviction and ferocity Sakura had shown in the defense of her teammate. 'It's almost the same... ' She studied the blonde more closely. What did she really know about her really? 'Is this some power that you have, Uzumaki Naruto?"

Oblivious to her thoughts, Naruto continued to cheer from the Hyuuga Underdog. "C'mon!" she yelled. "Don't give up, Hinata!"

"Be quiet," Neji hissed, turning annoyed white eyes up to the blonde. "This is none of your business."

"None of my business?" The blonde narrowed her eyes. "Excuse me for showing concern for someone you're whaling on like an enemy when everybody knows she doesn't have a single bone in her body!"

Hinata faltered, staring up at her in surprise. "Na...Naruto-kun..."

"Stay down, Hinata," Neji ordered. "You and I both know you're finished. You don't have what it takes."

The Heiress let out a hacking cough, blood spattering against the hard floor. Above them, Gaara tensed, his eyes widening at the sight.

"You're wrong, N-Neji-niisan..." she rasped. "I... am a ninja of Konohagakure... and that means..."

She paused, standing up painfully. "I will never give up... Never... not even if you kill me...!"

"Hinata..." Kurenai awed.

"Fine," Neji ground out with a growl. He was tired of it all, bowing and scraping to a girl obviously so much weaker than he was. This was his chance to end it all, and by Kami he was going to take it! "Have it your way!" He rushed towards her, prepared to deliver a killing blow.

"HINATA!"

Sakura, Naruto, and Lee all rushed forward, but the Jounin were faster. In the blink of an eye, they all surrounded Neji, holding him back from his target.

Gai gazed down at his student, his face a mixture of relief, anger, and disappointment. "That's enough, Neji," he said quietly. "We talked about this."

"Hn," If the boy was fazed by his expression or tone, he didn't show it.

A mere few feet away from them, Hinata let out a shuddering breath before coughing up more blood. She swayed a few seconds before collapsing.
"Hinata!" Kurenai rushed to her side.

Ignoring her, Neji turned to Hayate. "Well, Proctor?"

The sickly Jounin frowned, coughing slightly. "Winner... Hyuuga Neji..."

Kurenai snapped her head back to the Hyuuga prodigy, eyes narrowing in anger. "You..."

He scoffed at her. "Instead of wasting time glaring at me," he said calmly. "You should see to your subordinate."

Checking the girl's pulse, the Rookie Jounin let out a gasp of surprise. "Her heart has stopped! We need a medic down here right away!"

"Hinata!" Naruto jumped over the railing, rushing over towards them, Lee trailing not far behind.

Kurenai was currently administering CPR. "That last hit must have done it," she explained as she went through the standard chest compressions. Medic-nin arrived on the scene, immediately surveying the damage down to the Hyuuga Heiress, picking up where the kunoichi left off. "Stay with us, Hinata - please!"

Neji watched for a few moments before turning away. He moved to head back to the stairs only to be blocked by a furious blonde.

"You proud of yourself?" she said in a low tone. "Nearly killing someone who never did anything to you?!

"You don't know what you're talking about." he shot back.

"I know Hinata is a good person..." She gazed over at the girl being rushed away by the medics. "A good person who didn't deserve to be nearly murdered by the likes of you!"

The remaining Hyuuga glanced away from her, indifferent. "I don't have to explain my actions to someone like you..."

Naruto tensed, eyes narrowing. "Someone like me...?"

He turned back to her, giving her an measuring look. "You stand up there, cheering and yelling like a buffoon... carrying on as if this is some sort of game..." He narrowed his eyes in distaste. "However, you don't realize that killing is something all shinobi must do at some point in their life. If you can't accept that," He paused, smirking. "You don't have what it takes to be a ninja."

Listening to his words, Naruto's face was void of emotion. Her eyes were focused on him but her mind was back in Nami. Haku's fight was in the forefront, his final moments replayed over and over in her mind's eye.

~ "Such is the life of the shinobi..." ~

~ "All shinobi are tools..." ~
"Thank you..."

Haku's fading smile appeared before her and she twitched, forcing her mind back to the present. Neji's smirking face made her fists clench and blood boil. "Why you..." Before she knew it, she was rushing towards him, pulling her fist back to strike. However, she barely got a few feet before Leeo phased in front of her, blocking her path. She blinked in surprise. "Lee...?"

He glanced back at her, his expression serious, yet understanding. "You must not, Naruto," he said quietly. "If you attack Neji now you will be disqualified."

Realizing the truth to his words, Naruto lowered her fist, letting it fall limply to her side. She watched as Neji smirked and walked around them and back up the stairs to the balcony.

'Bastard...'

Lee placed a hand on her shoulder, blinking as she tensed in surprise. "You and I both know you are a strong ninja," he said, watching her eyes widen. "But Neji will not be swayed by mere words... You are a Genius of Hardwork, like me, but prodigies like Neji must be beaten in battle if you want to sway his thinking..."

"Is that why you train so hard?"

The Green Beast of Konoha grinned. "It is one of my goals in life to beat Neji’s natural prowess with my own years of youthful training," he explained. "But should you manage it," His grin widened. "That would be fine as well."

It took a conscious effort from Naruto to keep from blushing. However, all flustered feelings vanished as she glanced down at the floor, blue eyes zoning in on the blood on the floor. She knelt down beside it, dragging her hand through it. She rose to her feet once more, turning to face the Hyuuga who had resumed his place on the balcony.

Unbeknownst to her, a tense Gaara's eyes followed her every movement.

She’d only known Hinata in passing, but the girl had not deserved the beating dealt her. On her blood, Naruto swore she would be avenged. If a beating was what it took to make him see, by Kami Hyuuga Neji was in for the thrashing of his life!

"Oi, Hyuuga!" All eyes were on her now. She clenched her hand into a fist, letting the crimson liquid coat her fingers. "You and I are gonna face each other," she vowed. "And I’m gonna make you eat your words – believe it!"

Neji gave her a studying glare before turning away.

Lee stared at her back, awed. ‘Naruto...’

oooo

As attendants made their way onto the arena floor, clearing it of any debris (or fluids) everyone waited in tense apprehension. Seven fights had already taken place and only one remained.

This fact made Temari and Kankurou very, very nervous. The two Suna nin glanced cautiously over at their younger teammate, the redhead still intently focused on the red fluid being mopped up from the floor.
'He always gets like this at the sight of blood…' Temari resisted the urge to bite her lip in worry. Not over concern for Gaara – they were related to be sure, but there was no love between them. The boy was a homicidal maniac and just being in his presence terrified her. He was just too unpredictable! ‘This is a bad idea… I know it is…’

Kankurou met her gaze, similar thoughts running through his head. ‘Will he be able to control it…?’ he wondered, taking in the boy’s light, unfocused eyes. ‘Or will he snap and kill us all?’

Behind them, their jounin instructor, Baki frowned at Gaara’s back. “Calm down, Gaara,” he barked out. The boy stilled but did not turn his gaze away. “Remember why we’re here.”

“I remember,” he said softly. “I know my purpose.” Dark ringed eyes narrowed. ‘I exist to kill…’ He felt a surging rush of emotion, a lusty desire to kill, but he pushed it down, outwardly remaining impassive. ‘It’s only a matter of time…’ He gazed at the nin slated to be his opponent, still standing in the arena below. ‘You will soon die…’

Oooo

The attendants cleared the field and after shuffling through a list of names, the match board finally displayed the last fight’s participants.

Sabaku no Gaara vs. Rock Lee

“Yes!” Lee pumped his fist, a wide grin threatening to split his face in two. “At long last it is my turn!”

Beside him, Gai made an enthusiastic pose. “Go forth, Lee,” he exclaimed. “Make me proud!” His teeth pinged brightly as he did the ‘Nice Guy’ pose.

Kakashi groaned.

His subordinate saluted smartly. “Yes sir, Gai-sensei!” Then he, too, made the ‘Nice Guy’ pose.

The Copy Nin had had enough. “All right,” he said with a sigh. “We should probably clear the floor now so they can get started.”

“That’s so true!” Gai agreed. “Right as always, my Eternal Rival!” Oblivious to him, Kakashi groaned again.

“Hey, Lee!” Lee glanced back at the blonde behind him, his expression curious. She grinned back at him. “I’m lookin’ forward to facing a fellow Genius of Hard Work in the Finals.” She formed a fist, extending it out towards him. “So good luck!”

Lee met her fist with his own. “I will be there!” Once she retreated to the balcony above, the Leaf genin turned his attention to back his opponent who had just materialized in a whirlwind of sand. “So,” He shifted his body into a fighting stance. “Are you ready?”

On the sidelines, Hayate raised his hand into the air. “Begin!”

The taijutsu master needed no more prompting. He vanished from his spot with a flash, racing circles around the motionless Sand nin.
Above them, Ino let out a gasp of surprise. “I had no idea that Lee was so fast!”

“It doesn’t matter,” Everyone turned at the sound of Kankurou approaching them from the stairs.

Naruto glared at him. “What do you want, Cat boy?”

“Easy, easy,” He raised his hands in defense. “No need to get mad, Squirt, I’m just scoping out the next round’s competition,” he smirked. “No rule says I can’t.”

“Whatever,” she scoffed. “Why were you sayin’ Lee’s speed doesn’t matter?”

Kankurou shrugged. “Well, take a look for yourself.” Lee continued circling Gaara, executing a flurry of blows and kicks. However, under closer inspection, the genin above could see that every attack the green-clad genin made was blocked by—

“Sand…” Sakura awed.

“Gaara’s ultimate defense,” Kankurou explained. “There’s no way past it ‘cuz it reacts on its own. No one’s ever gotten past it.” He stared at the wide-eyed Leaf genin, his expression dark. “There’s no way your friend can win.”

Naruto growled, turning her attention back to the fight below. “I don’t believe that.” She said.

Gai glanced at her, before turning back to his student as well. The boy jumped out of the way of Gaara’s sand, landing nimbly on the hands of the statue of the Nidaime. “Lee!”

The boy’s head shot up, focusing on his teacher. “Yes, Gai-sensei!”

The Blue Beast of Konoha grinned, giving him a thumb’s up. “It’s time!” he called out. “You can remove them now!”

Lee’s eyes widened. “You really mean it, Gai-sensei?”

He nodded. “Show everyone the Roaring fire of your Spirit of Youth!”

“Yes sir!” The boy dropped into a sitting position, sliding down his leg warmers to reveal a set of old fashioned training weights.

Naruto’s eyes widened in surprise, her mind going back to their first encounter. She had wondered why his leg had been so heavy when she blocked his kick. ‘So that’s why…!’

“Gai…” Kakashi shook his head. Only Gai would be so old fashioned… “I doubt that’s going to make much of a difference.”

Gai only smirked as Lee began unfastening the weights.

On the opposite side of the auditorium, Temari snorted in disbelief. “Yeah right, like dropping a few pounds is going to hel—”

Lee let the weights slid from his hands. They hit the floor with a deafening crash, sending dust and rubble into the air.
Shikamaru’s eyes were comically wide. “Whoa!”

“Are you kidding me?” Sakura awed.

“Whoo!” Lee exclaimed, oblivious to the expressions of horror being directed at him. Even Gaara looked slightly surprised. “I feel as light as a feather now!”

“Yes! That’s the way!” Gai pumped his fist in enthusiasm. “Now go, Lee!”

“Yosh!” Once again, he vanished in a blur of green.

Gaara started in surprise his sand rose up behind, blocking a kick aimed at his head. ‘What…?’ The sand surged again, this time in front of him, as a fist blurred in front of his face. He whirled around trying to find his seemingly invisible enemy, eyes wide in confusion. ‘How…? How is he…?’

Gazing at his startled expression, Temari’s eyes widened in shock. Gaara was nervous! “That’s…”

“…impossible…” Kankurou could hardly believe what his eyes were showing him. ‘Gaara’s losing…?’

Lee reappeared in a flash of green in front of Gaara, landing a blow to his chin that send the redhead flying upwards.

“Got him!” Naruto cheered.

‘I-impossible…!’ Gaara winced at the blow, watching as his sand struggled to catch up with him.


“All right, Lee!” Naruto yelled. “You got him now!”

Lee grinned, vaulting into the air after his opponent. “Here we go!” He launched into a whirlwind of blows, pushing Gaara further and further into the air. Assured that his sand could not interfere, the taijutsu unleashed his bindings. “Primary Lotus!” The white bandages looped around the sand ninja and bound him tightly. With his opponent secured, Lee grasped his arms around the other boy, before he lead him into a spinning pile drive head first into the ground.

A hush fell over the arena as everyone stared at the crater created by the attack.

“That was…” Sakura’s green eyes were wide with shock. “That was amazing…!”

Kankurou stared. “Gaara…”

Lee rose to his feet, staring at his opponent’s prone form. He ventured forward cautiously only to start in surprise as the body before him slowly disintegrated into a pile of sand. ‘A substitution…’

“Look out!”
At Naruto’s call, Lee jumped back, narrowly avoiding the long tendril of sand that lashed out at him. The sand followed after him, forcing him to draw a kunai to fend off its attack. His eyes fell briefly on Gaara, as he rose slowly out of the crater, scowling darkly back at him.

‘I guess this fight is far from over.’ he thought to himself. He grinned at the thought. “Well then, let us continue!”

“Why doesn’t he try something else?” Sakura asked. Gai glanced over at her. “There’s no question he’s a taijutsu master, but doesn’t he see that taijutsu alone isn’t enough? He should try some ninjutsu!”

Gai frowned. “He can’t,” The others blinked at him in surprise. “Lee is very unique. He is the only ninja I have ever encountered that cannot mold chakra.”

“What?!” Sakura and Ino exclaimed in unison.

The taijutsu master nodded. “He was the last in his class because he could not utilize his chakra for ninjutsu or genjutsu.” His expression softened in remembrance. “He couldn’t even make a single bunshin. He had no hope as a ninja.”

Kakashi’s eye wandered over to his own student, her whole body tense as she surveyed the battle waging below.

“But Lee had spark and determination to succeed so I took him on as my student,” Gai continued. “I trained him in the ways of all things taijutsu so that he wouldn’t need ninjutsu or genjutsu to win.”

“A ninja that only uses only taijutsu…?” Sakura awed.

Naruto’s eyes gleamed in admiration. “He’s… amazing…”

Below them, Lee dodged another of Gaara’s sand whips. ‘He is strong…’ he thought to himself, vaulting backwards to use the wall as a spring board. ‘I will definitely have to work harder if I wish to beat him…’

“He may be good,” Kankurou murmured. “But there’s no way he can beat Gaara… his sand is impenetrable.”

“Oh yeah? Then how do you explain that?” Naruto pointed to the hairline cut along Gaara’s cheek. “He’s just gotta push a little harder!”

The taijutsu master’s thoughts ran along a similar vein as he closed his eyes in concentration. ‘I have no other choice,’ he told himself. ‘I will give it all that I have!’

Kakashi’s eye widened as the boy suddenly began glowing with chakra. He turned to his colleague in disbelief. “Gai… you didn’t…”

“I did,” Gai glanced over at him, daring him to object. “I have faith in my student.”

“Lee…?” Naruto called.

The air in the arena charged with energy as Lee’s body began taking on a transformation. His skin
darkened to an angry red, his irises fading into the whites of his eyes all the while chakra rushed over him like a wave. “NOW,” His head snapped up, focusing on Gaara. “FIRST GATE – OPEN!”

He shot off towards Gaara like a bullet, knocking him backwards with a blow to the face.

“What happened to him?!” Ino gaped.

“Gai has taught Lee how to open his Chakra Gates,” Kakashi said with a tight frown. “Since he can’t regulate the flow of his chakra, he opens the gate and lets it all flow out at once.”

“But that’s dangerous!” Sakura exclaimed.

Gai’s expression was serious. “He can handle it.”

Neji watched his teammate, Byakugan eyes wide at the display of power shown by his usually exuberant teammate. “Lee…” he breathed in astonishment.

Lee winced as he launched a kick at Gaara, sending him vaulting him upwards once more.

“His body is starting to succumb to the strain,” Shino remarked quietly.

“Then he should go back to normal!” Sakura exclaimed worriedly, all of her attention focused on Gai. If anyone could get him to stop it was him! Why let him go through with this? “He’ll get hurt!”

“He wants to prove his strength,” the jounin answered in response to her unspoken question. The pink-haired kunoichi blinked in surprise.

“At all costs, though?” Ino argued. “That’s nuts!”

The Sand nin hit the ground with a hard crash under Lee’s blow, but it was the Leaf genin who let out a cry of pain.

Naruto watched Lee with wide eyes.

~ "Neji is indeed a strong opponent,” ~ he had said earlier. ~ “Some day I hope to be strong enough to defeat him in combat.” ~

‘Lee, you want to beat face Neji… and to do that you’ve gotta beat Gaara…’ she thought to herself. ‘Do you want to prove yourself to him that badly…? Is it really worth it…?’

Sasuke’s face flashed before her eyes briefly.

~ “I’m only here to fight strong opponents.” ~

~ "You and I are gonna face each other at one point or another,” ~ She remembered the dark look he had sent her way – as if they weren’t teammates, but enemies about to face each other in battle. ~ "And when that time comes don’t hold anything back." ~

The blonde closed her eyes, clenching the railing tightly. ‘Is that the only point to all this…?’ she wondered. ‘To show each other up by any means necessary…?’ She opened her eyes,
frowning. ‘That’s not why I wanna be strong...’ Her eyes narrowed slightly. ‘Sasuke…’

Below them, Lee let out a scream, drawing her attention back to the fight. Gaara was down on one side of the arena, but his sand had snaked along the floor, wrapping itself tightly around the Leaf genin’s arm and leg.

Naruto had a foot up on the railing before she even realized what she was doing. “Lee!”

Kakashi’s hand shot forward and grasped her arm, halting her movements. “Don’t, Naru,” His gray eye was stern.

Gaara stared up at his opponent, his prey, his eyes filled with murderous intent. He raised his arm, slowly closing his fingers into a fist to increase the sand’s pressure, along with Lee’s screams. More sand leeched out of his gourd, rushing towards the other genin with the intent to smother him completely. “Now… you die!” His hand finally clenched shut and Lee let out a blood curdling scream.

“LEE!” Sakura screamed, watching as the sand rushed towards him.

The green clad ninja’s death would have been assured were it not for the sudden intervention of his teacher, slashing through the sand with a swipe of his kunai.

“Wha…” Gaara’s eyes registered confusion at his presence, shielding the other boy from him.

“That’s enough,” Gai said quietly. “The fight is over.”

Slowly rising to his feet, the redhead glared at him. “Why…” he hissed. “He failed… why do you protect him…?”

“Because,” the jounin answered. “He is important to me. He is my precious student.”

His words must have hit a chord within Gaara, for he reeled back as if struck, clutching a hand to his head as if in pain. ‘I don’t… I don’t understand…!’

Hayate coughed into his hand, studying the two participants with droopy eyes. “Winner by way of forfeit, Sabaku no Gaara.”

For the most part, Gaara ignored him, eyes focused on the other genin barely managing to stay conscious. Eyes glassy, he staggered away.

On opposite sides of the balcony, Temari and Gaara watched him in worry. ‘Gaara…’

Someone must have called for the medics for they appeared just as the Leaf genin collapsed due to the pain of his injuries.

Naruto’s eyes widened as the boy hit the ground with a thud. “Lee!” she wrenched her arm free from her teacher’s grip. This time Kakashi made no objections, watching as she vaulted over the railing, rushing over towards the medics. “LEE!!”

Gai stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. “Wait, Naruto,” he said. “Let the medics do their job.”
“But—” Naruto’s words died in her throat at the pained expression on the older nin’s face. She bit her lip to remain silent, staring at the white-coated backs of the medics as they rushed to stabilize Lee.

After several tense moments, one of the medics approached them as the boy was loaded onto a stretcher. “We’ve got him stabilized now,” he replied, his whole body tense. “We’ll be rushing him over to the hospital now.”

“Lee’s gonna be all right, won’t he?”

The medic gave the blonde a sympathetic expression before turning his attention to an equally tense Gai. “The bones in his arm and leg have been completely shattered,” he answered, his tone grim. “Even if they should heal, it’s unlikely he’ll recover as a ninja.”

Both Naruto and Gai tensed in shock.

“What?!”

Gai clenched his hands at his sides. “I see…” he said quietly, gazing at the floor.

The medic lowered his head as well. “I’m sorry…”

“He was so strong…” the blonde murmured. “And amazing… and you’re telling me that it’s all over for him…?” She glanced at both Gai and the doctor. “Just like that?!”

Gai clenched his eyes shut.

“We don’t have the capabilities to repair the damage that was done…” the medic explained. “He’s finished as a ninja.”

“No… it’s not fair… it’s not fair…!” she shook her head in disbelief, blond locks hanging in her face. Her eyes wavered slightly. “How’s he supposed to realize his dream now?”

“Lee understood the risks…” Gai said tightly. “He knew what could happen.”

“But he did it anyway…” Her gaze found the Hyuuga, but his eyes were focused on his teammate. “He wanted to fight Neji… and Sasuke…”

“And you, too, Naruto.”

“What…?” She blinked, turning to find Kakashi standing behind her.

“I could see it in his eyes as he watched your fight with Kiba,” The normally aloof jounin’s eye was soft in sympathy. “He was impressed by your strength and determination.” He paused, placing a hand on her head gently. “He wanted a chance to test his own will against yours…”

~ “Dreams…? I, too, have dreams. We shall see whose are the strongest!” ~

~ “It is one of my goals in life to beat Neji’s natural prowess with my own years of youthful training. But should you manage it - that would be fine as well.” ~

Naruto gazed at Lee as he was carried away. She formed her hand into a fist, raising it towards
him. “I remember, Lee…” she said. “I remember… and I’m not gonna lose…” Her voice broke slightly, but her gaze did not waver. “Believe it!”

Kakashi watched her with a sad eye. “Naruto…”

Hayate coughed quietly. “I hereby pronounce the Preliminaries over,” he exclaimed. “The participants who remain will have one month to prepare themselves for the next round.” He cast a serious look at the genin on either side of the arena. “Make sure you’re ready.”

“Don’t worry,” Naruto’s gaze was serious as she glanced back over at Neji. “I will be.”

End Chapter 11-b
Chapter Summary

With one month to prepare for the next round in the Exams, will Naru be prepared for what comes next?

Chapter 12

Kakashi hated hospitals. Kakashi hated spies. It was only his luck that he would get to experience both in the same day.

He gazed at the shattered window of his dark haired pupil's recovery room; the scuffle with the intruder had been brief, with ANBU quickly taking off in pursuit. To think that Orochimaru had planted a mole inside the village - one that would attend the bi-annual Chunin exams waiting for the moment when Sasuke would be strong to recieve his curse mark.

'Leaf Genin Yakushi Kabuto...' The jounin frowned at the name. 'Or Otogakure sleeper cell...'

'He participated in the exams 7 times, dropping out before the preliminaries and no one had thought to be suspicious?' Even an ex-ANBU like him hadn't thought twice until coming across him in the hospital. The boy had infiltrated the building, killed several ANBU, all in the attempts to kill Sasuke. If he had entered the room any later, he'd have encountered only his young student's corpse...

'But why try to kill him after Orochimaru marked him?' he wondered, gazing at his unconscious student. Fighting in the exams while fighting off the effects of the Curse mark had definitely taken its toll on the boy. Sasuke would need time to recover. Unfortunately, he couldn't do that if there were people out there trying to off him in his sleep.

To make matters worse, the fight roster for the next round had just been posted. Sasuke's first opponent would be the Suna ninja, Sabaku no Gaara. The Council had given him specific orders - against Gaara and Orochimaru's mark, Sasuke must not be allowed to lose.

He left the hospital room, rubbing at his temples in frustration. Training the Uchiha wouldn't be a problem - after all, Sasuke had the Sharingan; with it he could pick up on anything he decided to teach easily. However, Kakashi had two other students to consider. Granted, Sakura's fight with Ino had ended in a tie, which meant she would be unable to proceed to the next round. Naruto, however, had beaten Kiba, granting her a slot in the next round of bouts. And while he didn't seem to be in possession of homicidal tendencies, the blonde's opponent was still cause for a fair amount of concern.

Last year's #1 Rookie, Hyuuga Neji.

~ “You and I are gonna face each other,” ~ she had vowed before him and the rest of the attendees. ~ “And I'm gonna make you eat your words – believe it!” ~
Kakashi's visible eye darkened slightly. He couldn't train them both and he knew it. Their styles were too different, as were the areas they needed to focus on honing. Not to mention the strain it would put on the team's relationship as a whole. Something had happened in the Forest of Death - what, he didn't know - but it already had the three genin on eggshells around each other. It was worrisome, but the jounin sensei didn't know what to do about it. What his main concern for the moment was not how to break the bad news to Naruto, but how she would react when she heard it.

~ "We in Team 7 do not abandon friends, Naruto." ~ He remembered the words so clearly that had been spoken that day by the river. The very day they'd all discovered her secret. For Kakashi, with the new knowledge came guilt. It was disheartening to believe that underneath all that brash bravado she'd been afraid and unsure. She'd been certain that once he found out the truth of what she was, he'd turn her away. After all, given the life she had lived she was no stranger to disappointment. Yet the timid and hopeful light that entered her guarded blue eyes at his declaration had almost been too much bear. ~ "You forgot that already?" ~

Sparing Sasuke one last glance, he turned on his heel and exited the room. Making his way back to the elevator that would lead him down to the first floor, he closed his eye whilst heaving a heavy sigh. 'I didn't forget, Naruto...' he thought to himself. 'I just hope you believe me...'

"I'm sorry, but I can't allow you to pass..."

"But why? He's our teammate - we just want to see him!"

Making his way back to the lobby, Kakashi glanced up at the receptionist who was fending off two visitors. His eye recognized the familiar faces instantly. Wearily, pushing any morose thoughts back to the dark corners of his mind where they belonged, he slid his usual nonchalant expression back into place before stepping towards the front desk.

"That may be so," the receptionist was saying. "But Uchiha-san is not taking any visitors at this time. You'll just have to come back later."

She tried not to fear the worst, but when she'd rounded up Naruto to visit Sasuke only to be shut down not once, but three times, the pink-haired genin was starting to feel her concerns to be a bit more justified.

'Could it be because of that mark on him...?' she frowned thoughtfully, turning helplessly to her teammate. Naruto's face, however was carefully blank. "Please, miss... if we could just--"

"Ah, Sakura, Naruto... I'm not surprised to see you here." The two kunoichi glanced up at him, but only Sakura's face registered relief. Naruto's face was still void of emotion. Not good.

"Kakashi-sensei," Sakura exclaimed. "They won't let us see Sasuke-kun. Is something wrong with him...?"

"He's fine," Kakashi answered, closing his eye in a grin. "He just needs time to recover in time for the 2nd round matches." 'And to control the Curse seal left by Orochimaru...' He reopened his eye,
letting it fall on the unusually taciturn blonde. There was no time like the present, right? "And what about you, Naruto? Shouldn't you be preparing, too?"

Naruto quirked an eyebrow at him.

Sakura blinked in confusion. "Aren't you going to be helping her, Sensei...?" she asked. "She's facing Neji first."

The jounin opened his mouth to reply, but the blonde beat him to it. "C'mon, Sakura-neechan," She folded her arms behind her head, a lazy grin spreading across her face. "Don't you know already? Kakashi-sensei's gonna be focusin' on Sasuke."

Both of the other two members of Team 7 blinked in surprise. "And how do figure that?"

The blonde gave him a studying look. "I'm going up against Neji-bastard right off the bat," she replied. "Sasuke's getting that creepy Gaara guy... With his injuries, he's gonna need more'n just the Sharingan to beat'im..."

Sakura gawked at her in surprise. "And you're... okay with this...?"

Naruto frowned slightly. 'Of course not,' she thought to herself. 'But it's not like I have a say in it anyway...'. The blonde might have played the dunce, but the moment the line-up was announced, she knew what would happen. There was no way the village was going to risk their precious Uchiha to lose to an outsider... She forced her fox-grin back in place. "Pah, I can handle my own training!" 'I've done it before...'

Kakashi sighed heavily. "No need to get upset, Naruto," he replied. "It's not like I'm abandoning you--" The blonde twitched and he realized his choice of words had been poor. "I've arranged a substitute for you."

As if on cue, said substitute stepped forward. His sunglasses glinted under the fluorescent hall lights.

Naruto's grin fell to the floor with a deafening crash.

Sakura looked back and forth in confusion. "You've met already...?"

The blonde's expression was deadpan as she pointed an accusing finger at the elite jounin standing beside their teacher. Konohamaru's private tutor, Ebisu, was by far the most uptight, annoying man Naruto could ever recall having the misfortune of meeting. He thought so highly of himself and yet so little of everyone else - it was almost her duty to put him in his place. Taking a look at his smug expression, Naruto smirked before turning her attention back to her teammate. She waved a hand in Kakashi's general direction. "Pervert..." Then she gestured to Ebisu. "Closet Pervert."

The Copy nin let out a resigned sigh.

Ebisu glared down at the blonde, sputtering in indignation. "Wh-why I never...?"

She ignored him, turning her attention back to Kakashi. "I told ya, Sensei, I can handle my own training!" Glancing back at Sakura, she continued, "You can have him though, Neechan! You're gonna keep training too, right?"
The pink haired kunoichi blinked, surprised to see the blonde would think of her before frowning slightly at Ebisu in distaste. She leaned forward, whispering, "If he's a pervert, why the heck would I want him?"

"Now, now..." Kakashi replied.

"Such insolence!" Ebisu turned to Kakashi, puffing his chest out in annoyance. "That I, Jounin Special Elite, would even deign to train such an ungrateful--eh?" The older nin blinked when the subject of his tirade was no longer within his sight. "Where did--?"

Sakura's eye twitched slightly as she pointed towards the practice log beside her. Carved into its side was a crude whiskered face sticking out its tongue.

'Surprisingly, that went better than I thought it would...' Kakashi sighed again, running a hand through his hair resignedly. There was no doubt the blonde was upset about the recent turn of events, but the jounin's hands were tied. 'Sorry, Naruto, but I hope you understand why I arranged things this way...' He glanced over at Sakura, whose eyes held confusion as well as disappointment. 'I promise, it's only temporary...' He turned back to Ebisu. "Don't worry about it," The elite jounin quirked an eyebrow at him. "He can't have gotten far."

"Yes, well," Ebisu smoothed imaginary wrinkles out of his shirt. "You do realize you owe me for this, Kakashi-san."

Kakashi nodded, closing his eye in a grin. "Well then, why don't I throw in #7... to be fair...?"

Ebisu's face turned bright red. "#7... really?!!" Glancing over at the kunoichi's bewildered expression, the jounin quickly got himself back under control. Clearing his throat he replied, "That will do then. If that's all, I suppose I'll take my leave." With a short bow and a hand sign, he vanished in a poof of smoke.

Sakura blinked before turning an incredulous glare at her sensei. "You're really trusting Naruto to *that* weirdo?" she exclaimed. "*WHAT KIND OF SENSEI ARE YOU?! SHAAA!*"

Pulling out his infamous little book, Kakashi gave her a reassuring grin. "Oh, no worries... I'm sure Naruto will be just fine..."

Her expression was just as doubtful as he himself felt.

'Naruto... I'm sorry...'

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'Stupid, stupid, stupid...' Naruto bound over the rooftops in Konoha, cursing over and over in her head. No matter what she did, the outcome was always the same. Weak or strong, she would always be cast aside in favor of someone better. Why had she ever stopped to think that things would be different this time? 'I prove I'm not a weakling in front of everybody and I still end up playing 2nd fiddle to that self-serving jerk...' The worst of it all was that she couldn't really fault Kakashi for it. After all, he was only following the orders of the Council.

She stopped, pulling at her hair in frustration. "Aarrrgghhh! What do they all see in that uptight jackass?!!"
"As the top ranking ninja of your graduating class," The blonde scowled, throwing a surly glare over her shoulder at the jounin instructor. He paused, adjusting his sunglasses. "Uchiha Sasuke is a prodigy skilled in ninjutsu and taijutsu. He is no doubt a talented ninja."

Naruto scoffed. "Big deal, so am I."

Ebisu laughed, adjusting his glasses again. "I've yet to see proof of that, despite what Kakashi-san says..." he snorted. "But the *true* difference between you and Uchiha-sama is *your* abysmal chakra control."

She twitched in annoyance. "What's that?!!"

The older ninja smirked. "Take for instance this so-called unnamed jutsu everyone is speaking of - is it truly a Doton or cheap trick that shows how little control you have over your own reserves?"

"Shut up!" Naruto growled. "You don't know anything!"

Adjusting his glasses once more, Ebisu gave the kunoichi a studying look. "On the contrary... I know your problems lie in the fact you have more chakra than most genin," He paused. "Most ninja, in fact, if you must be specific."

Eyes wide, Naruto stared at him in confusion. "Howzat?"

"How do you think?"

His gaze went to her stomach and Naruto's hand went to cover it out of reflex. *That's right... the fox...'*

"From what I gather," Ebisu placed his arms behind his back, pacing back and forth in front of her like a teacher giving a lecture. "You fail terribly a simple jutsu like the Bunshin no jutsu because it requires a small amount of chakra. However, you can manage the more complex Kage Bunshin without blinking an eye because it allows you to utilize a large amount of chakra." He paused for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "It's like managing to fly when you're supposed to be learning to crawl..."

Amazingly, that actually made sense. Naruto frowned, scratching her head. "Never thought of it like that..."

Ebisu snorted. "I'm not surprised."

She shot him a dirty look. "Think what you want, Glasses-pervert, but I'm not stupid."

"Is that so?"

"Yep." Naruto paused before forming a positively devious fox grin. "Look at it this way... if I were so dumb, how is it that I'm able to outwit a Special Elite Jounin with a single jutsu?"

Ebisu balked at her. "You little liar!" he exclaimed. "You've never--eh?"

With another grin and a quick handsign, Naruto was replaced by the older and voluptuous Naruko - courtesy of her patented *Oiroke no Jutsu*. Wearing naught but strategically place wisps of smoke,
the buxom blonde sidled up next to the older nin, bat

thbig blue eyes accentuated with thick black l

ashes. "Aw, Ebisu-sama," she cooed, fiddling with his sunglasses. "Why are you being so mean to me?"

Powerless against her *charms*, Ebisu sputtered helplessly until falling over in a dead faint.

Releasing the henge, Naruto let out a loud laugh of triumph. "Ha, take that you uptight jerk!" With that, she turned on her heels, bounding across the rooftops once more. Throwing one more cursory glance over her shoulder to see if he'd regained consciousness, Naruto did not see the man perched on the rooftop ledge as she ran into him. "Whoops, sorry-- eh?"

The man was older with wild, shock white hair down his back pulled back in a ponytail. Judging by the large scroll that was strapped to his back and his attire, it was obvious to Naruto that he was a ninja. However, what she couldn't understand was what he was doing sitting alone on the ledge... That is, until he pulled out a telescope, giggling and grinning lecherously. Following his gaze, Naruto spotted a woman standing in front of her window in a neighboring building getting dressed.

This dirty old man was a peeping tom! It took half a second for her brain to process the information before she screamed in outrage. "Are you kidding me?!"

"Mmmfff! Hrrmmff!!"

Unaware of their presence, the woman walked away from the window.

"Damn it," the old man growled. "She's gone.." He sighed dramatically, glaring down at the blonde in his hold. "You have any idea what you've done, kid?"

Pulling out of her grip, Naruto returned his glare with one of her own. "Probably saved that lady the indignity of having some dirty old man watch her undress..."

He 'hmphed', lightening his glare slightly. "You're probably too young to understand, kid, but there's great pleasure to be had in admiring the wonders of the female body."

Naruto frowned, rolling her eyes. "I guess so... 'Sheesh, what a perv...'

The old man sighed, glancing back at the window longingly. "And she was so cute, too..." He shrugged. "Ah well... I suppose there's always the bath houses..." Running his hands through a series of hand signs, the largest frog Naruto had ever seen appeared before them. The old man hopped on, grinning like a kid on their way to a candy shop. "All right, Gama," he exclaimed. "To the bath house!"

The blonde watched them bound away, eyes wide in awe. "A summoning jutsu..." She paused, looking thoughtful. "That's gotta take a lot of control, right? That guy's good..." She frowned. "For a pervert." Was it possible that he'd teach it to her? "What do I got to lose?" Glancing back at Ebisu - the poor sap was twitching now, but still unconscious - she gave a haphazard shrug, bounding off after them. "To the bath house!"
Once Naruto arrived at her destination, it didn't take long to find her target. He was exactly where she expected him to be - hunched down outside of the women's bathhouse, peering in a hole in the wall. Wasting no time, she crept up behind him slowly, cupping her hands to a mouth. Taking a deep breath, she cried out, "Eeeeeek! Pervert! Perrrrveerrrt!"

Nearly jumping out of his shoes, the old man paled and jumped into the nearest bush. Seconds later, a group of towel clad kunoichi stormed out, murder in their eyes.

"Where? Where's the pervert?" They turned their attention to the small, blue eyed old lady standing in front of them. "Obaasan, which way did he go?"

Pointing a withered old hand to the left, the old woman replied, "He went that way!"

"Thank you, baachan!"

"No worries," one woman, obviously ANBU judging by the righteous fury in her eyes. "He's not getting away!"

They all marched away, muttering angrily as they went. "Can't even enjoy a bath in peace..."

The old woman watched them go, waiting until they were out of earshot before turning her attentions back to the bush beside her. "They're gone now..."

The old man poked his head out, glancing at the old woman as she was replaced by the short blond with a quick cry of 'Kai'! "I'm impressed by your use of the henge, brat," he replied. "But don't you have anything better to do with your time?"

"Don't you?" Naruto shot back. "I can always call them back, you know..."

"No, no," The old man waved his hands, placating. "Don't do that..." He climbed out of the bush, brushing leaves from his clothing in a dignified manner. As if he hadn't been there hiding from a bunch of pissed bathers... "So, I take it there's something you want."

"Yup."

"And I should help you... why?"

Naruto smirked. "'Cuz I doubt you want your butt kicked by a bunch of vindictive bathers..."

He glared at her in annoyance. "Good word choice." He glanced away, rubbing his neck. "So, whaddya want?"

"I saw you do a Summoning jutsu earlier," she explained. "I want you to teach it to me." The old man stared at her before laughing out loud. "I saw you do a Summoning jutsu earlier," she explained. "I want you to teach it to me." The old man stared at her before laughing out loud. "What's so funny, old man?"

"Teaching Kuchiyose no Jutsu to a brat like you?" The old man wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. "A puny thing like you doesn't have enough skill, let alone enough chakra to--"

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" When the smoke cleared, Naruto stood in front of him, flanked by two clones. Together, they all gave a cocky grin. "Wanna try that again, old man?"
The old man blinked, an intrigued grin spreading across his face. "I see..."

All three Naruto's blinked in surprise. "Huh...?"

oooo

Ebisu was roused from his dream of scantily clad kunoichi by the sensation of having cold water splashed in his face. "Huh... what...?" He glared at perpetrator, ready to yell out. However, taking in the man's white hair and peculiar face markings, he gasped in surprise. "Jiraiya-sama! Is that you?"

"The one and only." The old man smirked. "Heh, that punk did a number on you, eh, Ebisu?"

"I... I don't understand..." The instructor sat up, wringing the water from his hitai-ate.

The older ninja grinned and shrugged. "The kid asked me to check on you," he explained. "Make sure you weren't dead or something like that." Ebisu reddened in embarrassment. Jiraiya's grin widened slightly. "The kid's your student?"

"Gracious, no!" Ebisu exclaimed, aghast. "I am tutor to Hokage-sama's grandson, Konohamaru-sama!"

"His grandson, eh?" He rubbed his chin absently. "And blondie?"

The instructor straightened invisible wrinkles out of his turtleneck. "I am merely training him to control his chakra properly," he explained. "In all actuality, he's Hatake Kakashi's headache... Uzumaki Naruto."

Ignoring the way the younger man visibly shuddered at the mere utterance of the name, Jiraiya's eyes took on an intrigued spark. "Uzumaki, eh... how interesting." Reaching into his vest, he pulled out a small notepad. "Say, Ebisu, I've got a proposition for you."

Behind dark sunglasses, Ebisu blinked in confusion. "Eh?"

oooo

Wandering aimlessly through the village, Naruto thought back on the morning's events. To think that she'd actually been desperate enough to ask some strange weirdo to train her! 'Although he can't be worse than Glasses-pervert...' she thought to herself, kicking absently at a pebble in the dirt. 'He may be creepy, but at least he wasn't rude...'

What had Kakashi been thinking, assigning a guy like that to teach her? Didn't he realize they'd never get anything done?

Naruto stopped, frowning thoughtfully. 'No, he doesn't... How could he when he probably didn't even realize I knew him already...?' Not that she could really blame him for that. It was her habit of playing things close to the vest that got her into this predicament anyhow. Sure, her chakra control wasn't great, but it didn't hinder her fighting ability in any way - at least, in her opinion. Granted, Kakashi wouldn't know that because she'd never shown him the limit of her abilities.

'It's not like I don't trust him or anything,' she thought to herself. 'But what do I really know about
him 'cept that he likes to show up late and read porn in public?"

She frowned, thinking of the dirty little book her sensei always read. Who could stand that trash? 'Are all guys perverts?! How do girls put up with them?"

The blonde's thoughts were derailed as three girls walked past her, giggling as they paged through a teen magazine.

"Ooh, look at him! Isn't he cute?"

"He looks just like your boyfriend, Shuichi!"

"No way! Shuichi-kun is so much cuter!"

"Uh-huh, you're going to see him today, aren't you? Is that why you're dressed so nice?"

"Nuh-uh... do you think he'll like it...?"

Naruto stopped once more, watching them pass. Were girls supposed to act like that, she asked herself? None of them were ninja, but the sight of them had Naruto wondering. A majority of the girls back in the Academy had been like that. They spent their time focusing just as much on boys, clothes, and make-up as they did on kunai, taijutsu, and ninjutsu. The blonde recalled spotting some of her female classmates outside of the classroom; based on their style of dress and mannerisms they'd looked almost like ordinary civilians.

Kunoichi were different than ninja, Iruka had explained to her once. They were women as well as warriors. To some people they were considered weaker in terms of physical strength in comparison to their male counterparts, and had to make up for that in different ways. She had no idea what he'd meant of course. However, she did remember how the poor chunin had been so flustered when giving her a book on courtesean training, trying valiantly to answer all the questions that followed.

Watching the girls walk away had her wondering what would have happened had she not disguised herself. She'd behaved a certain way for so long... would she have even fit in as a girl? How was she supposed to act?

As the group of girls vanished around the corner, skirts swishing behind them, Naruto spared a glance at her own orange jacket. It was dusty and worn - at the rate her training was sure to go she'd have to replace it soon. She wondered if it were perhaps time for a change...?

A group of middle aged women walked past her, giving her dirty looks. She ignored them as they passef, frowning only when their backs were turned.

"Puh, whatever..." Dusting imaginary dirt off of her jacket, she decided it best to head home. 'I'll be starting my training with that old geezer in a few days... something tells me I'm gonna need all the strength I can get...'

oooo

After a few days time, Naruto found herself at the spot the old ninja had designated, only to find him nowhere in sight.
"Arrghhh... where is that bum?" she growled out, tapping her foot in agitation. "He better not be chronically late like Kakshi-sensei!"

Deciding it best to go and seek him out, the blonde took a step forward when she heard faint giggling in the distance. After a few misleads, Naruto once again found her target much in the same way she'd found him before. However, the only difference here was rather than peeking inside a bath house, he was crouched in the bushes on a small cliff that overlooked a small pound occupied by bathing-suit clad women. He had his telescope out, tittering excitedly like a school girl.

'Ugh... of course...' Sidling up behind him, hands on her hips, she gave him a hard glare. "Why am I not suprised?" she growled. "Don't you think of anything else?!"

The old man didn't look back, keeping his eyes on the spectacle below. "So you actually showed, huh?" he drawled out disinterestedly.

"Of course I did!" Naruto exclaimed. "You said you'd teach me Kuchiyose no Jutsu!"

She blinked in surprise when he finally turned back to look at her, his expression serious. "And why is it you want to learn to summon?" he asked.

"I read that its a good way to learn chakra control," she answered.

Jiraiya paused, scratching his head. "It's better for boosting stamina," he replied. "But... I suppose it can do that, too."

"Right!" Naruto beamed at him. "Y'see, I'm in the Chuunin exams right now, and my next opponent is a guy named Neji. He's a Hyuuga and a pro at chakra contro--" Her face reddened when she realized the old ninja's focus had gone back to the bathers below. "Aarghh! You're not even listening!!"

"Marvelous," he cooed. " Simply marvelous..." He paused, whipping out a notepad. "Yes, that's right, girls... frolic in the water... Perrrrfect...."

"Ugh..." She turned away, her expression one of disgust. "How can you stand yourself...?"

He blinked back at her innocently. "Wha...? It's perfectly harmless fun." he exclaimed. "You know, this was one of my favorite hobbies when I was your age."

Naruto stared at him, incredulous. "I'm twelve."

He wasn't phased. "What's your point?" A grin suddenly split his face as he turned back to the pool below. "Oooh! That's a perfect pose! I must have it!"

Resisting the urge to pull out her hair, Naruto let out another growl of frustration. "What was I thinking, trusting this guy?" She glared at him, raising her hands into an often used handsign. 'Well, he's asking for it now...' "Henge - Orioke no jutsu!"

With a poof of smoke, Naruto was once again replaced by Naruko, sliding lithe arms around Jiraiya's shoulders. "Ohhh, Sensei..." she purred. "You're being so mean, ignoring me like this!"

Jiraiya turned his head, his eyes wide as saucers.
'Aha,' Naruko smirked inwardly. 'I gotcha now, you dirty ol'--'

Face bright red, Jiraiya turned in her arms, latching onto her and nuzzling her face. "Oh my, oh my, you beatiful little thing!" he exclaimed reverently. "Where have you been all my life?"

That had not been the reaction the blonde had been expecting. Letting out a squeak of surprise, she wriggled out of his grip, leaping away to undo the henge. "What the hell!" she screeched, pointing an accusing finger his way. "That jutsu is supposed to knock out perverts like you!"

"A jutsu, eh?" Jiraiya only grinned in amusement. "Well, aren't you just a clever little punk." He rose to his feet, dusting the dirt from his clothes. "Too bad I'm not just any old pervert."

"Oh yeah?" Naruto sneered. "Then what kind are you?"

He grinned, wriggling his fingers delightedly. "A *Super* Pervert."

The blonde merely stared at him, her expression blank.

A crow cawed overhead.

The old nin cleared his throat. "How rude of me not to properly introduce myself when we first met - although I'm sure you already know who I am," He snapped his head back, letting his hair whip around as he struck an artful pose. "I am the Super wise sage of Myoboku Mountain... Frog Hermit Jiraiya of the Densetsu no Sannin!"

Outwardly, Naruto's expression did not change. Inwardly, however, she grimaced in distaste. 'Sheesh... he's worse than Gai-sensei...' Realizing the old man was waiting for some sort of reaction from her, she frowned lightly. "Legendary Three...?" She tapped her lip thoughtfully. "Mm... can't say I've heard of you..."

The tragic look on his face was priceless. "Whaa...?"

Naruto merely folded her arms. "Look, are you gonna train me or not? I told you I don't have time to waste."

"Yes, yes, I heard you..." Jiraiya turned, taking a few seconds to sulk. However, a few moments later he was grinning once more. "I'll teach you," he said. "On one condition..."

There was a glint in his eye that Naruto was certain didn't bode well for her, but she decided to take the risk. "What's that?"

He leaned towards her, chuckling mischievously. "You gotta do that jutsu again."

"Ack! What for?"

Jiraiya flushed, and the blonde was almost afraid of what his answer would be. "That blonde angel," He sighed. Naruto twitched. "Would be a perfect model for my next book..."

Blue eyes blinked in honest confusion. "Book?" Jiraiya nodded, reaching into his vest to pull out a very familiar orange book. Naruto's eyes went wide in horror. "Tha-tha-tha..." She could see Kakashi in the back of her mind, flipping through its horrid little pages, blushing much like the
girls she'd passed a few days before. "You wrote that...?!

"Oh, so you've heard of it?" Jiraiya's grin turned positively lecherous. He gave her a hardy pat on the back. "Well, kid, maybe there's hope for you after all."

Naruto's face turned an interesting shade of blue before she let out a blood curdling scream.

oooo

Miles away, Kakashi nearly lost his grip climbing up the rocky cliffs outside of Konoha. After making his footing was secure, he glanced back over his shoulder in confusion. Was that a scream he'd heard just now? His eye narrowed in concentration. *It sounded like...* He trailed off, shaking his head. "No, must've imagined it."

"Imagined what?"

"Hm?" Kakashi glanced upwards at the figure standing on the ledge above him.

Sasuke stared back down at him, a smirk on his face. "Are you gonna sit there all day?" he said casually. "You're already late."

"Or maybe you're just really early." The boy's expression told him how doubtful he thought that was. Kakashi chuckled as he climbed the rest of the way. Once he reached the top, he wiped the dust from his hands and turned to face his student. "So, are you ready?"

"I've been ready all day."

*Let's hope so,* Kakashi thought to himself. He lifted his hitai-ate, studying his student with both eyes. "Well then, let's get started."

oooo

It took some time for Naruto to stop Jiraiya from teasing her, but after an hour suffering through recitations of *Icha Icha Paradise* Volume 2, the old ninja finally relented and decided it was time to get down to business. He lead her away from the cliff to another small clearing in the forest, where he demonstrated the process of summoning one step at a time.

After a few dry runs, it was was decided that it was time to give it a try.

"So, you remember all the hand signs?" he asked her.

Naruto nodded, running through each one in her head. Inu, tori, o-hitsuji, nezumi... "Yup, I got it."

"All right then." Jiraiya nicked his own finger, running through the hand signs and then slamming his palm face down on the ground. Out of the ensuing smoke a large frog appeared with an equally large scroll hanging from its neck. Jiraiya took the scroll, unrolling it in front of the blonde to reveal a long list of names. "All right, kid, this is the Summoning Contract for the frogs," he explained. "In order to be able to summon, you need to sign your name - family name an' all - on this scroll in your own blood."

"My own blood?"
Jiraiya shrugged. "It's what makes the contract binding," he answered. "Don't ask me, that's just the way it is."

"All right," Naruto knelt down in front of the scroll, she scanned all the names until coming to an empty spot. She drew a kunai from her weapons pouch, carefully nicked her index finger, and then proceeded to write her name. U-zu-ma-ki Na-ru - it looked so plain in comparison to the name before hers; a series of kanji done in flourishing strokes. 'Namifu... Namikaze...
 Minako...? Minato...? Never heard of the guy...'

"Done yet?" Jiraiya asked.

"Just about." Naruto coated each of her fingers, leaving her prints on the old parchment just as the ones before her had done. Once she was finished, she rose to her feet. "There. All done."

The Sannin studied her work, frowning back at her. "Hey, what's the big idea?"

Naruto blinked at him. "What?"

"I told you to write your full name," he said. "Can't you manage that?"

"Of course I can!" She glared up at him. "You said to write my name so that the contract was binding and that's what I wrote! Uzumaki Naru - that's the name I was given!"

Jiraiya's frowned lessened slightly, his eyes showing his confusion. "I thought your name was Naru-to."

She frowned back at him, shaking his head. "No, it's just Naru." she answered honestly. "I would have told you that if you'd only asked."

'Got me there,' Jiraiya thought to himself. Deciding to let the matter go, he glanced back down at the blonde with a grin. "Naru is a girl's name, you know." he teased.

"Of course it is," she shot back. Pausing, a smirk made its way across her face. "You haven't figured it out yet, have you? Some legendary ninja you are!"

Sakura was right; Naruto did love getting a shock out of people when she told them she was a girl. This time was no different. She grinned mischievously at the stunned expression on the older nin's face.

"You mean... you're a girl...?" Jiraiya finally managed to sputter out. Naruto nodded with a grin. "Then that means... the Henge of you is probably what you'll look like when you're older..."

She blinked in surprise. "Huh... I never thought of that..." She glanced back up at Jiraiya, who was studying her with a lecherous grin. No doubt using his dirty little imagination... She let out a squeal, turning away from him. "Don't look at me like that, you pervert!" she screeched. She was never going to use Oiroke no jutsu in front of him again! Ever! "You... you... creepy old Ero-sennin!"

"My name is Jiraiya, not Ero-sennin. You can call me Jiraiya-sama, if you'd like."

Naruto only stuck out her tongue, letting out a loud "Nyyaaa!"
Sighing, Jiraiya decided to ignore her in favor of getting back to the task at hand. "Anyway, you've signed the contract, so now give it a go."

"Right!" Naruto's eyes lit up in excitement, running through the hand signs necessary for the jutsu. Slamming her palm into the earth, she let out a loud cry of "Kuchiyose no jutsu!" Nothing appeared. She glanced up at Jiraiya in confusion. "What happened?" she asked.

"Absolutely nothing." At Naruto's cry of outrage, Jiraiya ran a hand over his face in resignation. "Man, do we have our work cut out for us..."

Teuchi of the Ichiraku Ramen Stand was busy wiping down the counters when he caught sight of a familiar mop of blonde hair. He smiled as the kunoichi took her place in her usual stool, a wide grin on her face. "Well, if it isn't our favorite customer!"

"Hey, Ichiraku-jiji, Ayame-neesan!" she greeted.

"We haven't seen you around in a while," said the old man as he set about draining noodles for her upcoming order. He glanced back up at her, only to take notice of her companion. He blinked in surprise. "The same goes for you, Jiraiya-sama!" he exclaimed, bowing his head. "You honor us with your visit!"

Jiraiya sat down beside Naruto, grinning cheekily. "Eh, I'm just passin' through..." he said. "Though this little runt snagged me into trainin' him."

"S'all right, Ero-sennin," she interjected. "They already know." She turned back to the stand proprietors, grinning widely. "Pork and shrimp, please!"

"Coming right up!" Ayame smiled. "And you, Jiraiya-sama?"

"Chicken for me," he responded, his expression thoughtful. "So, you know..."

"Naru's a good girl..." Ayame said as she set out their orders. She giggled as the blonde immediately set into her meal, sighing in contentment. "It's just not fair how everyone treats her..."

"S'okay, Neesan!" Naruto grinned. "It'll be different once I'm Hokage."

Chopsticks halfway to his lips, Jiraiya paused to blink at her. "Hokage?"

The blonde slurped another helping of her noodles before answering. "The Greatest Hokage," she answered. "That's my dream... to become strong so that I can protect everyone."

The Sannin studied her a few moments before speaking once more. "I see," He glanced down at his own bowl, swirling the noodles around with his chopsticks. "I take it you already have people you wanna protect?"

Finishing the last of her ramen, the blonde nodded. "That's right!" she answered. "There's Ichiraki-jiji, Ayame-neesan, Iruka-sense, Kakashi-sensei and Sakura-nee-chan," She paused, making a slight face. "And even Sasuke-bastard... Oh yeah, and there's Shikamaru, and Chouji, Hinata and--" Her eyes widened and she hopped down from her seat. "That's what I gotta do!" The adults blinked at her in surprise as she bolted off down the street, waving at she went. "I'll see ya..."
"My, she was in a hurry," Ayame blinked, in awe at the blonde's speed.

Teuchi chuckled, "And she left you with the bill, Jiraiyas-sama."

"What?! That brat!" He paused, finding that he wasn't really all that mad. How could you stay mad at a kid like that, really? He rested his chin in his hand, letting out a chuckle as he watched the blonde vanish in the crowd. "She's something else..."

The talk of precious people had reminded Naruto that there were other injured people she had been meaning to see aside from her teammate. Although she was turned away from the Hyuuga estate, thanks to a receptionist far kinder than the one she'd met days earlier, the blonde had no problems making her way up to the hospital room door before which she currently stood. The only challenge she faced now was going in. Mustering up her courage, she slowly slid open the door, peeking her head inside.

Gai glanced up at the door as it opened, smiling slightly at the blonde who immediately locked eyes on the bed's occupant. "He's asleep," he answered. The blonde jumped, as if surprised to see him there. "They've given him quite a bit of medication to help with the pain..."

Naruto's blue eyes darkened slightly, noticing that even in sleep Lee's face looked slightly troubled. "I see," she murmured quietly, edging back into the hall. "I can go then..."

"No, that's all right," Gai insisted. "Come in and have a seat."

Flustered, the blonde did as he asked, stepping into the room fully. He blinked at the sight of the small potted plant in her arms. "Um, I brought this from home for him," she explained. "I figured Lee might like it cuz it's so green..."

"Green is a good color," the jounin replied. "It signifies the color of youth!" Despite his slightly subdued demeanor, his teeth still gave off a shiny 'ping!'.

"Oh... okay..." Naruto let out a nervous laugh.

"So," Gai said after a lengthy silence. "I hear you're going to be facing our Neji in the next round."

She nodded. "I'm training really hard," she said. "I hafta beat him... for Lee and Hinata."

"It will be difficult," the taijutsu master murmured. "Though he is a Branch member, Neji is considered the Prodigy of the Hyuuga clan. His skill far exceeds Hinata's."

"Yeah..." Naruto frowned, her mind replaying the fight between the two Hyuuga. "They used their chakra in their taijutsu to slow down their opponent... which means Neji wouldn't even hafta hit me to hurt me..."

Gai remained silent, his expression sympathetic.

"Unless..." Blue eyes fell on the unconscious genin, remembering his fight with the Suna Ninja, Gaara. His sand had acted as a shield against Lee's attacks. 'A shield...' Her eyes widened. "That's
Naruto rose to her feet, eyes bright in excitement. "I know how to fight Neji!" she exclaimed. She turned to Lee's bed, pumping her fist. "Don't you worry, Lee! I'm gonna show that *Prodigy* what a Genius of Hardwork can do!" Setting the plant down on the nightstand, Naruto headed for the door once more. "See ya later, Gai-sensei!" With a quick wave, she was gone.

Gai grinned to himself. 'Your youth shines so brightly, Naruto,' he thought. 'I hope it's enough to make Neji see...'

Jiraiya found Naruto the next day at their usual training spot. However, the topography had somehow changed since their last meeting - broken rocks and dust covered just about everything, including the blonde standing in the middle of the clearing.

"Hey, Ero-sennin!" she called, sweaty and dusty but none the worse for the wear.

The Sannin gave her an appraising look. "I doubt you managed to summon a whole stampede of frogs to cause this damage," he remarked. "So what've you been up to?"

She grinned mischievously. "Workin' on a technique for the Finals."

'A technique, eh?' "I thought you wanted to learn Summoning..."

"I do," she answered. "With the control I learn from Summoning I can perfect my own technique."

Jiraiya grinned down at the blonde. "You've got me curious now, kid... but if you try doing too much too fast, you'll end up killing yourself."

"Well, I can't die yet!" she exclaimed. "I've got too much to do!"

'Like this kid,' The Frog Hermit laughed out loud. "All right then, let's see your progress."

"All right then!" The blonde went through the necessary handsigns, slamming her hand down. "Kuchiyose no jutsu!" A puff of smoke appeared, revealing a small toad no bigger than Naruto's fist. "Ha ha!" she crowed. "How 'bout that!"

"And what exactly are you supposed to do with that...?" Jiraiya asked, bewildered.

She blushed, embarrassed. "I dunno," she admitted sullenly. "At least this one doesn't have a tail..." She thought of all the tadpoles she'd summoned earlier, shuddering.

"That's true," Jiraiya relented, sighing heavily. "There's something you're doing differently..."

Naruto scratched her head. "Well, I was workin' on my jutsu about an hour..." she said. "But I'm having a hard time getting my chakra to move how I want it to..."

Jiraiya paused, glancing over at her. "How's that?"
"Well, Kakashi-sensei had us doin' excerises to improve our control when we were in Nami no Kuni," the blonde explained. "And I was doin' okay with them until we ran into that Kusa-nin in the Forest of Death..." She frowned in rememberance. She still couldn't figure out what it is that ninja had done... "Since then my chakra's been actin' funny..."

"Define funny."

"Um... well..." She fidgeted at the serious expression on the Sannin's face. "See for yourself." Forming the cross seal, she molded chakra into the bottom of her feet. Blue chakra slowly trickled upwards, intermingling with brief sputs of red.

"I see..." Jiraiya's eyes narrowed slightly. "Do me a favor, kid, an' take off your jacket." The blonde blinked but did as he asked. "Now mold some more chakra..."

"Um, okay..."

As she gathered more chakra, Jiraiya studied the seal that sudden became visible beneath the hem of her shirt. He recognized it as the seal the Yondaime had created to seal the Kyuubi, but something was a bit off. With closer inspection, he realized something had been altered. Or removed...

Only one person would have dared such a thing... 'So she ran into *him*, huh?' Jiraiya's frown deepened. 'Damn it... I can see that he changed the flow of the fox's chakra, but what the hell else did he do...?' He scowled when no answers came to him. 'Well, there's nothing for it... I'll have to ask the Old Man. In the meantime, however...' He raised a hand, drawing chakra to his fingertips. Without warning, he rammed his hand into the seal, causing the blonde to gasp in surprise.

"Ero-sennin...?! What did you...?" Blue eyes stared at him in confusion before slowly drifting shut. Jiraiya caught the girl as she slumped forward, lifting her into his arms. Marveling at how light she was, he spared her with a rare gentle smile. "No worries, kid," he said. "You're gonna be just fine..."

oooo

Sarutobi sat at his desk, signing documents when he sensed a familiar presence behind him. Setting down his pen, he smiled lightly. "It's been a long while..." he turned, facing the white haired ninja sitting on the windowsill. "Jiraiya..."

The Frog Sannin nodded. "That it has..."

The Hokage frowned slightly. "Why do I get the feeling that you're not here to reminisce...?"

Jiraiya smirked ruefully. "That's because I'm not." he answered. "There's something you need to know..."

"If it's about Orochimaru..."

"It's about Naruto." That brought the Hokage up short. Jiraiya's smirk melted into a deep frown. "The Seal's been altered..."
End Chapter 12
Chapter 13: Determination

Contrary to popular belief, Gaara did not like blood. Homicidal though he may be, the young Suna nin couldn't stand the sight nor smell of the life-giving fluid. As a matter of fact the very sight of it sometimes made him ill. The sight of his own sent him into a panicked frenzy. Of course, no one would ever be aware of this - the boy kept a tight reign on his emotions... Except, of course, when his inner demon got too much for him to bear.

Even now he could feel the lust surging inside of him, threatening to bubble over and rise of the surface. With each passing second the presence that was always with him gained more strength, whispering thoughts of malice and murder in his brain. Normally he would have complied just to silence the voice - if only temporarily - but something held him back. There was something different this time - he could sense it.

This one... was like him.

The small blonde currently subject to his scrutiny rolled over in her sleep, snuggling deeper into the warmth of her worn comforter.

Gaara had known they were alike the moment he'd laid eyes on her all those weeks ago. Bright blue eyes were hard as diamonds as they focused on Kankurou, intent on doling out serious harm should he try to harm a single hair on the Hokage's grandson's head. No normal ninja could create such a look without eyes like that and no normal ninja could have eyes like that..

Unless you housed a demon.

~ BUT WHAT KIND? ~ That voice hissed in his ear, its tone far more curious than he could ever recall hearing it. ~ I CAN'T SENSE IT... ~

Nor could he. Aside from their first encounter, the only indicator that the girl was housing a supernatural being were the three whisker-like scars on either side of her face. Since then his demon, try as he might, had not been able to pick up a single trace of youki from the girl.

~ I BET IT'S A MINOR DEMON. ~ it sneered. Gaara didn't respond - he made a habit of not carrying on conversations with his demon. It spoke enough for the two of them. Though unperturbed by his silence, the demon sighed in disappointment. ~ IT'S WEAK AND SO IS SHE. ~

The Suna nin had to admit it had a point. A true killer wouldn't have let their enemy go once they had them in their clutches, and yet the girl - Uzumaki Naruto she called herself - had allowed both Kankurou and that Dog ninja to keep their lives. She'd even allowed her attempt on that white-eyed ninja to be stopped by the ninja in green

~ WE HAVEN'T YET KILLED HIM, EITHER. ~ his demon reminded him. ~ I HOPE YOU HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN YOUR PURPOSE... ~
'I exist to kill...' Gaara recited to himself, pale green eyes narrowing slightly. Though he had no interest in the exams currently in intermission, his mind went to his next opponent. Turning away from the ledge overlooking the blonde's bedroom window he recalled the dark haired gennin he'd heard so much talk of - Uchiha Sasuke. A prodigy, they called him. Heir of the doujutsu Sharingan and pride of the Leaf Genin. A boy with eyes full of hatred, just like his.

His demon was silent.

'Uchiha Sasuke;' He felt a surge of adrenaline that could not be attributed to his demon. Sand swirled around him as he vanished from sight. 'I will enjoy killing you.'

oooo

Baki scanned the rooftops of the village, his visible eye narrowing in frustration. It was well after dark and there was still no sign of Gaara. Insomniac though he may be, it was never a good thing to have the red-haired youth roaming anywhere unescorted - especially at night.

Bringing him to this village, making him such a large component had been a large gamble - one the Suna-ninja still wasn't sure was worth the risk. The boy was unstable - anyone could see just by looking at him - and had been so since he was younger. To place him in the middle of an exam where ninja were fighting each other was bound to put him over the edge...

'But that's the whole idea, isn't it...?' The jounin sighed.

"Lovely night, isn't it?"

Baki turned, startled at the sudden presence of a cloaked ANBU. Turning to face the other nin fully, he chose not to respond, tensing his body for any sudden attacks.

The ANBU's posture remained relaxed. "I'm willing to bet you don't get night's like this in Kaze no kuni," he continued, his posture lax as if they were just having a casual conversation. "I imagine Gaara's out enjoying himself right now."

Recognizing the other nin as their local contact, Baki drew his hand away from his kunai pouch with a frown. "He won't be a problem."

"Of course not," the ANBU replied casually. "I just thought I'd drop by and let you know that everything will be going according to plan."

He nodded, his expression hardening. "Anything you want me to do until then?"

"Mm," the ANBU tapped the chin of his mask thoughtfully. "Nothing I can think of. Just enjoy yourselves here in the Village... especially since it won't be around much longer."

There was a sudden rustling sound and both ninja turned, searching for the source. Baki reached for his kunai pouch once more.

"Don't worry about it," the ANBU replied. "I'll take care of it." He walked in the direction the sound had originated so casually, as if he were merely taking an evening stroll. "I will handle this - you just make sure our little trump card doesn't do anything stupid... say, like kill his opponent before the next round of exams."
Nodding, Baki watched the ANBU vanish from sight. This whole thing was a bad idea... what was the Kazekage thinking? Knowing it wasn't his place to question his village leader, he turned to resume his search for his wayward 'student'. 'Don't do anything reckless, Gaara...' he silently warned, even though he knew the boy wouldn't have heeded his words even if he could hear him. 'We're too far in over our heads to screw things up now...'

He glanced at the place where the ANBU had previously stood, wondering idly what would become of the unfortunate fool who'd been discovered. Hearing the sounds of a battle take place, he quickly bounded away to avoid discovery. 'That is... if we haven't already...'

The following morning, Konoha ANBU were alerted to the discovery of the body of Chuunin Exam proctor, Gekkou Hyate. He'd been discovered by Chuunin on their regular patrol.

Watching as his corpse was taken away by the Investigation squad, Kakashi scowled beneath his mask, hands clenching at his sides. First ANBU, an attempt on a Genin, then a Jounin... what was next, the Hokage himself...?

'Just what the hell is going on...?'

"Aaaarrrrgghhh!" The birds that scattered from the trees at the sudden cry went unnoticed by the small blonde, so frustrated by the results of her training... or the lack there of. The fist-sized frog she'd summoned forth sweat-dropped in embarrassment - whether at its apparent lack of size or her outburst, no one could be sure.

"Ero-sennin," The blonde turned to the Sannin standing behind her. His back was facing her, his attention on a group of girls bathing in a riverbed below. "What am I doing wrong?"

The white-haired ninja lowered his telescope, sighing heavily. "Beats me, kid," he answered. "It's your chakra."

Was it possible that she wasn't strong enough to carry about this jutsu? She blinked, suddenly feeling distressed. "Are you sayin' I don't have enough chakra to do this?"

"Are you kiddin'?" Jiraiya exclaimed. "You've got reserves bigger'n than ninja twice your age... plus you've got the fox's chakra."

Naruto tensed, surprised that he would speak of the Bijuu contained within her so candidly. "The fox..." She lowered her eyes to the ground. "I've only used it twice before..."

Jiraiya frowned, "Hm? What's that...?"

The blonde sat down, eyes darkening in remembrance. Though she was hesitant to recount the story - especially to someone she wasn't exactly familiar with - but the words were already spilling forth. "It was back in Nami no Kuni... me an' Sasuke - my teammate - were facing this ninja named Haku..."

If he noticed the change in her tone at the mention of this ninja, the older ninja made no mention of
"He was a lot stronger than us... nothing we did could stop him..."

"And what happened...?" Jiraiya prompted.

She squirmed uncomfortably. "Sasuke... took a hit meant for me..." Her hands clenched tightly in her lap. "I thought he was dead and knew I was gonna be next if I didn't do something." She paused, a hand going to her stomach. "I was pretty hurt, too, but next thing I know I'm feeling better, stronger, and angry... so angry..."

'I see...' Jiraiya studied the small blonde, his expression solemn. 'At a moment where her life was in peril, the seal weakened and allowed the fox to influence her...' He paused, studying the distressed expression on her face. 'She beat the ninja, saved herself and her teammate... so why's she look like somebody killed her best friend...?" "What'sa matter?"

His voice must have roused her out of her thoughts. She shook her head, blue eyes clearing slightly. "Nothing," She glanced up at him, her grin slightly strained. "I... don't like thinking about sad stuff." She rose to her feet, brushing debris from her clothes. "Anyway... what's the fox hafta do with any of this?"

"Well... I believe the fox is your key to mastering this jutsu."

Predictably, the blonde blinked in confusion. " Eh...?"

oooo

The door to the Yamanaka Hana-ya opened with a cheerful jingle. From her spot at the register, Ino looked up at the sound, a greeting smile on her face. "Good morning, welcome to the Yamanaka Hana-ya," she chirped. "How can I help-- Sakura?"

Halfway through the door, the pink-haired kunoichi of Team 7 blinked in surprise. "Ino?"

"Huh," Leaning her chin in her palm, the blonde smirked. "It's just Forehead."

Sakura hmphed, turning her attention to the shelves of flowers lining the store. Her eye caught a vase of daffodils and she smiled, reaching out.

"How plain..." Ino was behind her, leaning over her shoulder. "I hope those aren't for Sasuke-kun."

She blinked. "Why not?"

"What?" the blonde gaped in surprise. "You mean you haven't heard? Sasuke's not in the hospital anymore."

How could she have known when they'd refused to let her see him? "He got released?"

"More like walked out..." she snorted. "Sheesh, Forehead, that was weeks ago! What have you been doing all this time?"

"Training," Sakura answered simply. Ino blinked at her in surprise.
Though she had been no more keen on using Ebisu as a sensei, she had to admit that Naruto's idea had merit. She'd always felt left out - even moreso when her teammates had gone on to train for the next round of matches. Why should she be left behind?

She'd approached Yuuhi Kurenai, jounin sensei of Team 8 and renowned genjutsu specialist, and asked her assistance. Though the older kunoichi had been a little leery about assisting in the training of a genin not under her command, she'd supplied her with information scrolls and helpful advice that gave the girl confidence to train on her own.

This time Sakura was certain that she'd never be left behind again.

Turning her attention back to the flowers, Sakura selected two daffodils, cradling them gently as she walked back over to the register. Ino followed behind her in quiet awe. "I'll take these two, please."

Snapping out of her stupor, the Yamanaka girl wrapped the two flowers, studying her curiously. "If they're not for Sasuke-kun..."

Sakura smiled gently. "They're for Lee," she answered. Ino blinked in surprise once more. "He saved my life..."

Ino closed the register, handing her the appropriate change. She gave Sakura a smile. "I'll go with you."

Sakura didn't argue, and after waiting for Ino to close the shop, together the two left and headed for the hospital.

Arriving at the hospital, the two kunoichi had no trouble being directed to the Lee's hospital room. Entering the room the receptionist had indicated, they found the taijutsu master asleep in bed.

"We shouldn't wake him..." Sakura whispered, lingering in the doorway. "He's probably in a lot of pain..."

Ino nodded, her expression sympathetic. "I heard that with his injuries, he might not be able to be a ninja anymore."

Sakura only sighed.

Remembering the fight that had lead to his current condition, Ino shuddered involuntarily. That Sand ninja had shown no mercy. If it hadn't been for Gai-sensei... "And to think that Sasuke-kun's going up against that guy in the finals..."

"I have confidence in Sasuke-kun." Ino glanced over at Sakura, surprised by the tone of her voice. She sounded so sure of herself. "He'll be just fine. I know it."

'But how do you know...?' she wondered, watching her. 'What is it you know that I don't...?'

Making her way over to his bedside, Sakura leaned over to set the daffodils on. "Lee-kun," she whispered softly. "These are for y-- huh?"

"What is it?" Ino asked.
"It looks like Lee's already had a visitor," The pink-haired kunoichi gestured to the small potted plant currently residing on the table beside her daffodils. "I wonder who left it..."

"Beats me," Ino joined her by the bedstand, reaching over to finger the red petals blossoming on the plant. "Hm..."

"What kind of flower is it?"

"A Geranium," the blonde's blue eyes were thoughtful as she turned to Sakura. "In the language of flowers it means 'Determination'."

"All right, Ero-sennin, I'm ready!"

Jiraiya stood at the edge of the clearing, regarding to eager blonde with a serious expression. "Remember what I told you earlier, Naruto," he said. "In order to access the fox's chakra, you're gonna have to exhaust all your normal chakra first."

Naruto nodded. The Sannin had explained the workings of the seal left behind the Yondaime. According to him, its purpose was to not only contain the spirit of the Kyuubi no Youko inside of her, but gradually meld its chakra with hers over the progression of her life up until the point they were one and the same. At first she hadn't understood this at first - why seal a youkai in an infant child? - but the Frog-hermit had said it was because only an infant's inner chakra coils could adapt to support foreign chakra.

Though Iruka and the Hokage had attempted to explain things to her the night she discovered the truth about what she was, only now did she understand. It was no wonder she'd always had such difficulty molding chakra. How many people could say they had two separate - though gradually merging - chakra reserves? Nonetheless, Naruto was not about to let the fox hold her back. If she had to tap into its chakra to manage Kuchiyose no Jutsu, then damn it that's what she was gonna do!

A determined fox-grin broke out across her face. "Gotcha!" She brought her hands up, forming the cross seal. "Kage Bunshin no jutsu!"

12 Naruto clones appeared, 6 flanking her on each side.

"Whoa, impressive," Jiraiya murmured.

Naruto turned to her bunshin, raising her hand to gain their attention. "Listen up, guys!" she called out. "We gotta burn up chakra and we gotta burn it fast! So what we're gonna do is have a free-for-all! Got it?"

"Got it!" the clones chorused. That said they all turned on each other, engaging each other in hand-to-hand combat.

The Sannin grinned. "Smart," he said, studying the blonde's clones. Though she was no master, the kid was pretty good at taijutsu. "Still, it's gonna take a while to burn through your reserves at that rate..."
While her clones faced each other, the original Naruto molded chakra to her feet to walk out onto the water of the nearby river. 'Ahh... so she does know how to water-walk... good to see Hatake taught her something after all...'

"Heeeyyy!" The remaining clones halted their mini-battles, turning to the original. She grinned at them. "Don't tell me you forgot about me already?"

"What? No way!" Clones #4 and #7 eached slammed a hand palm-down to the ground, heaving up a chakra-charged hunk of rock. Hefting it over their shoulders, they hurled them at Naruto with all their might.

The blonde hopped and flipped out of the way of each volley, giggling as the water splashed up around her. "C'mon guys, you can do better!" she howled with laughter. "You're me, after all!"

"She's got a point!" said #7.

"Then let's hit her again!" Clone #5 bounded forward, ripping up a flat piece of rock and hurling it like a discus.

'12 years old and already making up jutsu...? She's already giving him a run for his money...' "Not bad," Jiraiya said with an amused grin. "I wonder if she realizes that it's not a Doton."

"O'course we know, Ero-sennin!" He turned his attention to Clone #3 who had spoken. The clone made a face at him. "We're not stupid, y'know!"

"Really? Then why don'cha explain how this jutsu of yours works."

#3 opened its mouth to speak only to be poofed out of existence courtesy an ambush by #2. "If it were a Doton," it explained. "We'd be using chakra to reshape the rock to expel it towards our opponent... Instead, we force the chakra into the ground around the rock, yanking it up to the surface. And that's why," It paused and reached down to demonstrate only to be cancelled out by a punch from clone #9.

"And that's why," #9 finished. "We're calling it the Uzumaki Chakra Spade!"

"Chakra as a weapon..." Jiraiya mused.

"Yup! Same as Hyuuga-teme!" #9 grinned as it pulled up another flat piece of rock, using it as a shield to block a flying kick from Clone #5. "We're working on a way to block his chakra strikes, but for now we'll just hafta use rocks if we have to."

'A jutsu that's a form of chakra manipulation...' Jiraiaya rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Say kid, ever thought of evolving your 'Chakra Spade' into a... 'Chakra Shield'?"

"Already way ahead of ya, Ero-sennin!" Naruto turned to Clone #4 standing on the shore. "Go for it!"

"You got it!" Jiraiya's eyes widened comically as the clone hefted up a hunk or rock almost as big as itself, hefting it over its head as if it weighed nothing, and hurling at the original with all its might. He watched as the kunoichi formed the sign for the Horse, then placed her hands up - palms out - in front of her. A wall of blue chakra formed in front of her, causing the rock to be blown apart into small pieces.
The blonde's blue eyes brightened in elation. "Yes! I did it!" she cheered. "The Chakra Shield! Woo hoo!" She did it a little victory dance across the surface of the water. Unfortunately, it was at that moment that her chakra decided to dwindle on her. With a yelp, she vanished beneath the surface with a loud 'sploosh'. Her remaining clones simultaneously vanished with a the usual poof of smoke.

Jiraiya sighed, watching as the blonde pulled herself to the shore looking very much like a drowned kitten. "You did a good job, kiddo," he said as she finally made her way up to him. "Now, let's see if that work paid off."

The blonde nodded, knicking a finger and obediently running through the necessary handsigns. "KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU!" She slammed her hand and watched with trepidation as a cloud of smoke appeared...

Only to reveal a small tadpole squirming in the dirt.

"Yaaaarrrgggghhhhh!!!!"

The Sannin sighed again, dragging his hand across his face. Though he was also a bit disappointed, a part of him had known this would be the end result. The blonde released the summons, dropping down on her knees with a disparaging sigh. "Kid... don't give up..."

"I'm not..." she said quietly. "But I just gotta get this jutsu... I gotta..." She clenched wet dirt in her fingers.

Jiraiya was quiet a long time, just studying her profile. "Tell you what," he said finally. "Why don't you take the day off tomorrow?"

Naruto whipped her head around to face him so quickly, the Sannin swore he could hear her neck crack. He winced inwardly. "Whaa...?" she exclaimed loudly. "I can't! I don't have time!"

"You'll never get the hang of this jutsu if you force yourself," Jiraiya said. "So, tomorrow, no training. You're gonna need to relax. Do everything that you've been wanting to do for a while, okay?" 'Cuz it just might be your last chance...'

Though there was a grin on his face, Naruto knew a fake one when she saw it. She cocked her head, studying him curiously. "What's the matter with you...?"

"Huh?" he blinked. "Nothing... I'm just hungry, is all."

She perked up, jumping to her feet. "So'm I!" she chirped. "We should go get some ramen!"

Jiraiya grimaced. "No ramen," he groaned. "That stuff'll end up killin' ya if you eat too much."

"Too much ramen?!" Naruto stared at him, aghast. "There's no such thing!"

There was a long stretch of silence, broken only by the cawing of a crow overhead.

The white-haired nin make a quick grab at the blond, hefting her over his shoulder like a sack of potatos. "C'mon, brat," he chuckled, ignoring her squawks of indignation as he began his trek back to the village. "Let's go find a nice Takiyaki place."

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"Aaghh, no! Ero-sennin, lemme go! I want raaameeeennn!"

Umino Iruka was making his way towards the Academy, intent on using the few hours before class to grade a few papers when he suddenly he sensed another chakra signature approaching at a rapid speed. Years of experience told him that the other ninja was not hostile, so he was prepared for the orange-covered arms that wrapped around his shoulders in a greeting hug.

"Iruka-senseeeeeeiiii"

The chunin craned his head to smile at the blonde, automatically directing his steps towards the Ichiraku. It was good to see the blonde back in her normal high spirits, especially considering how distraught she had been the last time he'd seen her...

oo Flashback oo

Iruka managed to conceal his surprise at the sight of the small blonde standing on his doorstep. He couldn’t recall the last time she’d come to his apartment - usually she’d show up at the Academy after class, or meet him at Ichiraku. The fact that she was here and not protesting an overwhelming need for ramen indicated to him that there was something very wrong.

"Naruto...?" Blue eyes shifted upwards from the floor, focusing in on him as if he were the only person she could depend on. He didn’t know who would tear up first, him or her.

"Iruka-sensei..." Her voice was so quiet, barely above a whisper. "What do you do when someone you care about dies...?"

He froze, his mind quickly going over the list of people dear to the blonde and vice versa. Sadly, the list was very short. "What happened?" He paused, stepping out to touch her shoulder. At the contact she sagged against him, allowing him to guide her inside. "Come in sit down first... I'll make you some cocoa."

Once he got the blonde situated, he did that just that. In the hours that followed he listened as Naruto recounted her mission in Nami no Kuni. The paternal/fraternal part of him had gotten a little anxious at the mention of the kiss she’d been given by a boy - who she’d first thought was a girl - only to later learn that he was a missing nin out to kill her client. Iruka first assumed she was upset over the betrayal, but one look at her told him that what she’d felt went much deeper. For the first time in her life she’d found someone she thought was a kindred spirit, one who saw her for what she really was and liked her anyway.

And in the end she’d had to take his life...

The two of them stayed up the entire night, Iruka doing his best to console the young girl. He recounted missions from his own days as a genin, telling little jokes of his own pranking escapades - occasionally bringing a small smile to her whiskered face - until she fell asleep against his shoulder.

'You've already gone through so much in life,' he thought, brushing a strand of hair out her face. 'She stirred only a little, snuggling deeper into the crook of his arm. 'I wish I could always be there to protect you...' Of course he knew he couldn't - Naruto had always been independent - she
was a ninja of Konoha, and it would only be a matter of time before another dangerous mission came along where she had to face an equally dangerous ninja...

*He shook his head to halt that thought - there was no point in worrying over things that had yet to happen. 'I'm only a chunin, and your my ex-student.' He sighed, closing his eyes. 'But at least here, right now... I can keep you safe.'*

*After a few moments, he too fell asleep.*

oo End Flashback oo

"...sensei...? Iruka-sensei...?" Naruto leaned forward, blue eyes blinking at him owlishly. "You awake, Sensei?"

The chunin blinked, laughing nervously. "Sorry, didn't hear you..." He grinned at her. "I was concentrating on carrying your weight... You've gotten bigger, I think."

She grinned. "Ya think so?" She hopped down with a laugh, trotting ahead of him to the ramen stand. He continued at a calmer pace, taking his usual seat at the bar to find that the blonde had already ordered for the both of them.

He thanked Ayame when she set down his ramen with a grin, turning his attention back to his old student. "So, Naruto, I haven't seen you in a while. What've you been up to?"

"Training!" Naruto chirped, never taking her eyes off of her meal. "My next opponent is Neji!"

So he had heard. Considering their opposing ranks in their graduating classes, it was quite possible everyone in the village was aware of the upcoming match-up. Heck, he'd noticed some of the other teachers setting up a betting pool already! "Neji, huh?" He broke his chopsticks apart, scooping up a serving of hot noodles. "That's gonna be tough."

She nodded in agreement. "Yeah, but it's gonna be real hard. Since he specializes in a chakra-based fighting style I've been tryin' to come up with a way to block him using my own chakra."

"That's good," Iruka replied. "It must be tough training." He blew on another helping of noodles before slurping them up. "Especially with Kakashi-san training you and Sasuke at the same time."

The blonde stopped her hand halfway to her mouth before resuming the motion as if nothing had happened. She slurped her noodles noisily before casually replying, "Eh... I haven't seen either of them in weeks."

Iruka stared at her in surprise. "What?"

"Kakashi-sensei's been training Sasuke alone because he's going up against that Suna-ninja Gaara," she replied, her expression bland. She stirred her noodles absentely before taking another bite. "But whatever... I found somebody else to help me."

The chunin instructor studied her helplessly. *'Naruto...'*

Naruto finished her ramen, broth and all, letting out a satisfying sigh. "Ah, that was great as always!"
Ayame grinned. "Glad you liked it, Naru-chan." she laughed. "Would you like another?"

The blonde opened her mouth to accept when she spied a familiar head of pink hair out of the corner of her eye. "Can't! I gotta go!" She hopped down from her stool, bounding off in her teammate's direction. "I'll see you guys later! Bye, Neechan! Bye, Iruka-sensei!"

"Bye bye, Naruto!" Ayame called after her. "Oh, Umino-san, she left you with the bill..."

"What?!" Iruka paused before slumping over with a sigh. Resting his chin in his palm, he chuckled as he watched the blonde vanish in the crowd. "What am I supposed to do with you, Naruto?"

oooo

"Sakura-neechan!"

The pink-haired kunoichi turned, a grin spreading across her face at the sight of the blonde. "Hi, Naruto!" She stopped, waiting for her to catch up. "Shouldn't you be training?"

"Sensei gave me the day off," She explained. A part of her grimaced at the thought of calling Jiraiya a sensei. 'The old coot's head would probably swell twice its size..." "He didn't want me to fry my brains out, I guess."

Sakura giggled at the familiar line. It was becoming a running joke between them, it seemed. "So, what're you up to today?"

"Well, actually..." The blonde looked down, shuffling her sandal in the dirt. "I was wondering if you might wanna hang out... that is, if you're not busy or anything..."

She blinked in surprise. "Really?"

Naruto nodded. "Sensei told me I should do everything I haven't gotten a chance to do, since tomorrow my training's gonna be super-hard," she explained.

"Ah, I see," Sakura grinned. "So today's supposed to be about relaxing."

"Yup. So, did you wanna do anything?" She paused. "Unless... you're busy"

If possible, the Haruno girl's grin widened. "I know just what we can do," she said. She grabbed the blonde by the hand, leading her down the street. "C'mon, let's go!"

"Ah, Sakura-neechan..." Confused, the blonde had no choice but to let herself be lead along. "Where exactly are we going...?"

"My house!" Sakura answered.

Naruto falter slightly, causing the other girl to glance back at her in confusion. "Your parents won't mind...? Me coming unannounced that, is..."

Sakura shook her head. "Don't worry," she answered. "Mom's out of town visiting my Great-aunt Hanako."

"And your dad?"
"Dad's a merchant so he's away a lot," Sakura answered, leading them to the Haruno residence - an apartment residing over a bookstore Naruto had always passed on her way to school. ('Sakura's family owns a bookstore?' she thought to herself. 'No big surprise there!)"

"So are you the first ninja in your family?" Naruto asked. The other kunoichi nodded. She grinned in response. "Cool! So when you're older, your kids' kids will be asking you about how super-cool you were back in the day!"

Sakura blinked in surprise; her dreams of children had always only gone so far as being part of a mold she saw herself in. Mrs. Uchiha Sasuke... or Sakura-obaasan, an amazing kunoichi in her own right...? 'I like the sound of that.' She chuckled, leading the way up her bedroom. "And here's my room."

Naruto studied her surroundings, an appreciative expression on her face. "You've got a lot of books, too, Neechan." she remarked.

"None on Dynamic Botany, though," she teased. Naruto stuck out her tongue. "All right then, have a seat."

The blonde did as she was told, her expression curious. "So, what're we doing?"

Sakura grinned. "We're gonna give you a makeover."

Though it was not unexpected, Naruto gaped in surprise. "Eh...?"

End Chapter 13
Chapter 14 - Do Your Best!

Chapter Summary

“Just be strong, don’t doubt, and have faith in yourself. It may take a while, but you can do it!” She grinned. “Rock Lee will be a ninja again - believe it!”

Chapter 14

It was official. Special Elite Jounin Gekkou Hayate had been murdered.

Though his body had shown no visible signs of attack when it had been discovered by ANBU, the Forensics division of the Interrogation and Investigation Squad had done an autopsy that determined the sickly man’s death had been caused by one skilled in the use of the Chakra blade.

Yakushi Kabuto… it was not an easy pill to swallow, learning one of your own had been turned against you – or had possibly been against you from the beginning. The genin was the adopted son of one of Konoha’s renowned medic-nin, but the father had died suspiciously during a mission outside of the village.

The Sandaime Hokage took a puff from his pipe, expelling the smoke from his lungs with a heavy sigh. He turned tired eyes back to the many jounin assembled in the room. “We know that there is a traitor in that midst, and thankfully we know who that traitor is – even if we still don’t know his current location.”

Some of the ANBU stationed in the room twitched slightly. It was no secret that one of their own Uzuki Yugao – fiancée to the deceased – had been all set to hunt the betrayer down.

“However,” the old man continued. “Given the situation we now find ourselves in, we have to assume that he is not the only one conspiring against us. I caution you all to remain on your guard. The next round of exams is not too far away – we cannot allow an incident to occur now.”

Several jounin in the room nodded. Dignitaries from across the shinobi nations were arriving everyday to witness the upcoming event. To lose face in front of them now would be devastating…

Anko stepped forward, a grim expression on her usually manically cheerful face. “What about Orochimaru?” she asked.

The kage frowned. “I’ve no doubt he will be surfacing again soon,” he replied. “We can only pray we are prepared when the time comes.” He rose from his seat, turning to face the window. “You all have your assignments. Dismissed!”

“All!” All the ninja vanished from the room.

Sarutobi was left alone, staring out at the Hokage monument. ‘Shodaime, Nidaime… Yondaime…’ he thought, staring at their stone visage. ‘Please watch over our village…’
Beneath his mask, Kakashi grimaced at the sudden resurfacing of the memory. Following the impromptu meeting at the Hokage Tower the jounin had surprised to be confronted by a one Umino Iruka.

Seeing the chuunin instructor being over-protective was one thing, but seeing him angry was something entirely different.

Taking one look at the normally affable ninja radiating such quiet anger, several of the other jounin exiting the building behind him had decided to make themselves scarce – missions to take care of, and all that. Kakashi’s fellow jounin instructors, however, lingered on the sidelines watching to see what was going on.

Lucky him…

~ “Have you forgotten, Kakashi?” ~ Iruka had exclaimed. ~ “You were assigned three students, not one!” ~

He’d felt a stab a guilt – barely managing to conceal it beneath his usual mask of indifference. Instead, he’d explained the situation to the chunin, none too surprised when he didn’t calm down in the least.

~ “I know there are extenuating circumstances…” ~ the chuunin said. ~ “But why is it Naruto claims to have not seen you in weeks? Surely that can’t be true if you’ve been checking up on his progress.” ~

He should have been – he knew that better than anyone. But checking up on the blonde would only make him feel worse. Yes, the blonde had understood the reason for the change but she hadn’t been any happier about it than Iruka. ‘She’d been hurt…” he’d sighed to himself, remembering once again the look that had flickered across her face. ‘And you saw it, too…” ~ “Iruka…” ~

~ “You know Hyuuga Neji is definitely going to be a tough opponent.” ~ Iruka ground out. ~ “Did you really think a month of chakra training with Ebisu is going to make a difference?” ~

Behind them, Gai let out a heavy sigh.

~ “And what about Sakura-san… have you forgotten about her?” ~ The chuunin struggled with himself for a moment.

~ “If it helps any,” ~ Kurenai cut in quietly. ~ “Haruno-san is training herself; I loaned her some genjutsu scrolls to practice with.” ~

It didn’t, but Kakashi thanked her anyway.

Iruka nodded to Kurenai briefly before turning his anger back to him. ~ “I assigned you your team at the Hokage’s order, even though you’d failed every other team you’d been given,” ~ he said. ~ “We all know you were given Sasuke for a reason, but you can’t just ignore the other two, damn
“I haven’t ignored Sakura or Naruto,” he said after a long period of silence. “When the time comes I will resume their training – but for right now, Sasuke is my primary concern.”

Forsaking two students for the other… How disappointed Sensei would be…

“As if he hasn’t been your only concern all along,” Iruka said with a scowl. “How do you expect them to protect him if they don’t improve as well?”

‘All my students are my concern,’ Kakashi told himself. Though he was surprised the chuunin’s harsh words had managed to get him so rattled, that hadn’t made his words any less true.

Those who abandon their teammates are worse than trash… That was the lesson his team had imparted to him and he’d done his damndest to make sure his own students understood. Yet how could they when he didn’t follow his own example?

A loud crash roused him out his thoughts, turning his attention to the only student under his tutelage at the moment. The Uchiha was breathing heavily, but no worse for the wear, studying his own handiwork with a satisfied gleam in his eye.

Putting his thoughts on hold for the time being, Kakashi slipped back into teacher-mode, surveying the damage wrought by the boy’s attack. “I see….” he said mildly, though he was thoroughly impressed. Despite everything, he hadn’t expected Sasuke to catch on so quickly. Though part of him felt a bit concerned by this, he shoved that down as well. “Not too bad, Sasuke… not too bad at all.”

“Hn,” was his reply.

Kakashi smirked inwardly. “Now, let’s see if you can do it again.”

The boy glanced back at him and nodded.

Not too long after, the air was filled with the sound of chirping birds.

“Again?!”

Sakura let out an exasperated sigh, staring down at the girl seated in front of her. “Yes, again!” she exclaimed. “You should wash and rinse at least 3 times!” She scrubbed furiously at the blonde’s messy locks, barely detectable under a pile of heavy suds. “Honestly, Naruto, do you even use conditioner?!”

There was a pause. “Um… no…?” Her teammate gave her a look before pouring water over her head. “Aaaughhh!! Thakura---ththbbhtthhb!!”

After suffering through another round of shampoo and conditioner, Naruto was relieved from her suffering when Sakura led her from the bathroom back to her bedroom. Seating the blonde back on the bed with a towel and instructions to thoroughly towel dry her hair (Gently! Don’t just scrub at it with the towel, Naruto!), she turned her attentions to her closet.
“What’re you looking for, Neechan?” the blonde asked, blinking at her teammate from beneath the pink towel.

Perusing through rows of clothing – which surprisingly comprised of more than just red and pink - Sakura grinned at her from over her shoulder. “Something for you to wear, of course.” She answered.

“Eh? What’s wrong with what I’ve got on right now?”

Sakura turned, surveying the plain t-shirt and usual orange pants the blonde currently donned. Her orange jacket was hanging over the back of a nearby chair, just as worn and dusty as ever. “Aside from the fact that they’re soaking wet from all your struggling,” she remarked matter-of-factly. The blonde stuck out her tongue. “You can’t have a complete make-over without a change in wardrobe.” She turned back to her closet, venturing further into its depths in search of a suitable outfit. “Maybe some of my older stuff…” she murmured to herself. “That might be small enough for you…”

“Hey!” Naruto pouted. “Neechan…”

“I can’t help it if it’s true…” Sakura said with an apologetic grin. “You are kinda on the small side…” She paused, her expression thoughtful. “And yet you’re still so amazing.” The blond blinked in confusion. “Despite your grades in school, you’re smart and strong… You’ve managed to surprise everyone by doing things no one ever expected you to be able to do.”

“Like what?” Naruto asked. “Beat Kiba?”

“Well, there’s that,” she admitted. “It’s like there’s this new Naruto… one that can do anything.” She stared at her, her expression awestruck. “Where’d you come from? Or were you here all along and none of us bothered to pay attention…?”

Naruto was silent for several moments before allowing a fox-grin to spread across her face. “Sheesh, Neechan, are all make-overs like this?”

She laughed even though knowing the blonde had deliberately dodged the question – no matter how rhetorical it had seemed. “Not really,” she said. “We usually just talk about silly stuff… you know.... clothes, make-up, the latest gossip,” She paused and blushed. “The cutest boys…”

The blonde rolled her eyes. “Boys, huh? I hope you don’t mean Sasuke…”

“Of course I mean Sasuke-kun!” Sakura exclaimed.

Naruto shrugged. “I don’t get what it is you guys see in him.”

Sakura sighed. “Well… he’s a mystery.” The blonde cocked her head in curiosity. “Back in the Academy, Sasuke-kun was so quiet… He focused on his studies and never really talked to anyone… it made girls curious… they – we wanted to know more about him. The more he pushed himself harder and pushed others away… the harder we tried… to get through his wall…”

Blue eyes concealed beneath the fluffy pink towel closed in remembrance. Though they had initially been in different classes, Naruto remembered Sasuke back in the early days. “He was training to become an Avenger,” she murmured. “Cuz his whole family had been murdered.”
“I know,” Sakura replied, staring at her hands. “But… I know there’s more to him than that.” The blonde opened her eyes, blinking at her in surprise. “He acts so cold, but I’ve seen moments where he was gentler… kinder…”

~ “I can’t even relate…” ~

~ “We wouldn’t want you to,” ~

~ “Thank you for helping me.” ~

~ “It doesn’t matter. You’re my teammate. I’m supposed to look after you.” ~

The pink haired kunoichi smiled fondly at the memories. He tried so hard to put up a cold front to the world, but there had been moments where she’d seen the real Sasuke… “I know deep down he’s really lonely.” She frowned lightly. “It’s not fair that he should have to become an Avenger… he shouldn’t have to push everyone away just to achieve his goal!” She looked up at Naruto who was staring at her with an awed expression on her face. “We’re his teammates aren’t we? We’re supposed to help each other!”

“Sakura-nee-chan…”

“Naru…” She turned back face her fully, meeting her eyes pleadingly. “I know you and he don’t get along very well – for whatever reason – but… we have to look out for each other… all three of us.”

~ “You can let me look after you, too… I know I’m not as strong as you guys, though, I know… but I figured I’d just let you know, because, you know… we’re teammates, like you said…” ~

~ “Hn… do whatever you want.” ~

“Right…” Naruto said after a long period of silence. “We of Team 7 don’t abandon our teammates.”

“Or our friends,” Sakura prompted. “I know if we work together we can help him with his goal… his dream…”

‘You feel that strongly for him Sakura…?’

Naruto remembered that day back in Nami so painfully clear. The desperation in the Uchiha’s eyes at the thought of his impending death…

~ “I wanted only one thing… That man… the one who killed my family… I wanted to kill him…” ~

~ ”I wanted to avenge them all… that was my dream…” ~

“Naruto…?”

The blonde looked up at her teammate, her expression thoughtful. “What about you, Neechan?” Sakura tilted her head in curiosity. “What’s your dream?”

The other girl paused, as if recalling something in her mind. “To become a strong kunoichi,” she said finally. “One that I can be proud of…” She paused, a grin spreading across her face
slowly. “So that my grandkids can talk about how super-cool I was.”

Naruto blinked at her in surprise before letting out into peals of loud laughter. Before long, Sakura was laughing right along with her.

oooo

Tenten knew Neji was considered a prodigy, and as such it wasn’t unexpected to see him training rigorously to perfect one jutsu or another. However, as she watched him go through another practice session in preparation for the next round of exams, the female member of Team Gai could say with almost absolute certainty that she had never seen her teammate dedicating so much energy to his training.

It was something about the blonde, Uzumaki Naruto, Tenten knew. Before setting foot on their training ground, the Hyuuga branch member had dedicated hours to researching his upcoming opponents – the blonde prankster in particular. Not that she could blame him really – none of the information regarding the boy seemed accurate. He was renowned throughout the village as a shameless, shiftless prankster but it was through his efforts that his team had managed to complete an A-rank mission involving Kirigakure missing nin. He’d graduated last in his class but he’d managed to beat an Inuzuka in stealth and taijutsu!

Dropping down from her perch, she walked over to him, keen eyes studying the deep trench he currently stood in. “Wow…” she mused. “It worked.” She looked up at him, grinning. “You did it, Neji.”

He nodded with a short, ‘Hn.’

‘Yep… Neji’s definitely pulling out all the stops to get ready for this kid…’ She smiled lightly to herself, surveying the damage he had done to their field during his training. As much as she admired his skill as a ninja, it was sort of satisfying to see him so ruffled by an upcoming opponent. If anyone needed to help themselves to a slice of Humble Pie, it was certainly Neji.

Her grin slowly morphed into a small smirk. “You sure have been training hard, Neji,” she remarked, keeping her tone casual. “You’re not worried, are you?”

Neji glared at her – but to the casual observer it was only a slight tightening around the eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous.” He growled. “That fool couldn’t possibly do anything that would surprise me.”

oooo

Sakura stumbled back towards the bed, staring in muted shock.

Naruto watched her, biting her lip worriedly at her continued silence. “What is it, Neechan?” she asked. “Did I put it on wrong? Is it really bad?”

The other girl shook her head slowly. “You look… like a girl…”

The blonde blinked at her before turning her attention to the full length mirror on the wall. Taking in her appearance she left out a soft gasp of surprise. Another person stared back out at her, a shiny haired blonde with her hair pulled back out of her face with a peach-colored ribbon. Her petite figure was clothed in a matching colored sundress, large white flowers printed in the material.
“Wow…” was all she could manage.

Recovering from her own shock, Sakura rose from her seat pulling her into a tight hug. “Too cute!” she squealed.

“Ack! Neechan!”

Letting her go, the pink-haired girl released her and took a step back to stand behind her. “It’s true, though…” A grin stole across her face as she surveyed her handiwork. “Not bad, huh? You’d knock the boys dead in this for sure!”

“Boys?” The blonde flushed a deep red. “What boys?”

“Oh come on, Naruto,” Sakura giggled. “All this talk about boys and crushes and you mean to tell me there’s no one you’re interested in?”

“Interested in for what…?”

Sakura refrained from bopping her over the head as it would ruin her hairstyle. “Don’t give me that… there’s gotta be somebody!”

“I hung out with Shikamaru and Chouji all through the Academy,” Naruto explained. “But they’re just friends!”

“Well, what about Lee?” Sakura ventured with a grin. “You were cheering pretty hard for him – what was that all about?”

Naruto’s cheeks darkened even further. “He was good!” she exclaimed. However, the end result of his fight came to mind and she sobered instantly. “But now…”

“Ino and I went to see him,” the other girl replied.

“So did I…” the blonde admitted. “I wanted to talk to him, but he was asleep…” She paused, clenching her hands at her sides. “It’s still not fair… he fought so hard…”

“I know, Naruto…”

“I wanna tell him… not to give up,” Her eyes gleamed fiercely. “Not to give up on his dream.”

“Then why don’t you?”

She blinked in surprise. “Eh? You mean like right now?”

Sakura’s grin returned full force. “Yeah, right now.” She said, pushing her towards the bedroom door. “Why not?”

“B-b-but… my clothes…” Naruto much resembled Hinata at that moment, sputtering and quaking like a little bird.

“Your clothes will be fine,” Sakura promised. “They’ll be here waiting for you when you get back.”
“Ah—wha—That’s not fair, Neechan!”

She stuck out her tongue in response. “Doesn’t have to be,” she argued. “Your sensei told you to do everything you haven’t gotten a chance to do yet, ne?”

“Th-that’s not what he meant!” Naruto eeped at the fierce expression being directed towards her by her teammate.

Sakura’s eyebrow twitched in annoyance as she loomed over the blonde. “Get going,” she ordered. “Before I have to beat you up and redo your hair--”

Naruto zipped past her and out the window like a bullet. “Hai!”

Giggling, Sakura cupped her hands to her mouth calling after her, “And remember – you’re wearing a dress!”

The blonde waved, vanishing over a neighboring rooftop.

The pink-haired girl sighed, picking up the blonde’s jacket from its spot over the chair. She doubted the blonde would be giving it up anytime soon; the least she could do was fix it up and wash it for her.

Her mind went to the ninja her teammate was currently on her way to see. How would he react to see Naruto dressed up? ‘If she happens to gain his undying affection, all the better for me’ she thought with a grin. ‘But if anyone can get his confidence back, it’s Naru.’ She paused, grinning. *DO YOUR BEST, NARU-CHAN!! SHAAAA!*

oooo

Of all the things Naruto had expected she would have trouble with when it came to behaving as a girl, wearing a dress had not been one of them. After all, it was just another random piece of clothing, right?

‘Wrong!’ she thought to herself, face flushed red in mortification as she made her way across the rooftops of Konoha. With each bounding leap she took she had to hold down the hem of her borrowed dress to keep from flashing unsuspecting villagers below. ‘This is ridiculous! How do girls put up with this?!”

Deciding she would be better off walking the rest of the way to the hospital – after all, it wasn’t like she was in any rush, right? – she dropped down to the street below. However, just as she rose up to continue on her way she was plowed into from behind by a small body.

“Hey, what the--?”

“Watch it, lady, I’m in a hurry--” A familiar young boy donned in large goggles glared up at her, only to gawk up in surprise at the sight of her familiar whisker marks.

‘Oh crap…’ Naruto flushed in embarrassment.

“Konohamaru-kun!” Moegi and Udon bounded up to them, panic evident on their faces. “He’s still after us!”
“Crap! I didn’t think he’d get out of that trap so soon…”

The blonde sighed. No doubt the three of them were up to their usual antics. Glancing around, she spotted an empty alley a few yards away from where they stood. Wasting no time, she grabbed the ring leader and sprinted off towards it.

“Where are you going with our Leader?” Moegi demanded, stomping after them, her cheeks puffed out in righteous anger.

“Relax, Moegi-chan, I’m not hurting Konohamaru.” She set the boy down, ruffling his hair affectionately. “As a matter of fact, I was helping him hide. I take it you’re hiding from Glasses-Pervert?”

“Yeah, that’s right…” Udon snuffled. “But how did you…”

The little redhead stared up at her, gasping in surprise. “Boss? Is that you?”

The blonde laughed, rubbing her neck nervously. “Yup, it’s me.”

“But you’re dressed like a girl!” Konohamaru exclaimed, finally recovering from his muted shock.

“That’s cuz she is one!” Moegi explained. “ Didn’t you know that?”

Now it was Naruto’s turn to be surprised. “How’d you know?”

The younger girl grinned cheekily. “Woman’s Intuition.”

Her two male companions blushed heavily.

‘Right…’

“B-but I don’t get it!” the Hokage’s grandson sputtered. “Why’d you never say anything? You’re supposed to be my rival!”

“Well…”

“Well, she can always be my rival,” Moegi grinned.

“No way!” The boy blushed angrily. “I saw her first!” He gulped, watching as a mischievous grin spread across the other girl’s face.

“Konohamaru-kun has a crush on Naru-nee-chan! Konohamaru-kun has a crush on Naru-nee-chan!”

Naruto let out a suffering sigh.

“I do not!” Konohamaru protested. “I do not have a crush on Boss…”

“You don’t?” Udon asked, wiping his nose with a handkerchief he produced from out of his long sleeve.

“No! Boss is my rival, not my girlfriend!” He stuck his tongue out at Moegi with a loud
'nyaaa!“So there!”

“Good.” She said simply.

“Good?"

The young girl nodded her head resolutely before latching on to Konohamaru’s arm. “That means I can be your girlfriend!”

“WHAT?!"

Naruto let out a loud laugh. “Well, I know when I’m beaten,” she teased, heading back out to the street. “I’ll see you guys later, ‘kay?”

“Bye, Boss!”

“Wha…? Boss?! You can’t leave me like this!”

“Bai bai, Naru-nee-chan!”

The blonde snickered, jogging off with a wave.

“BOOSSSS!”

oooo

A light knock at the door roused the Hokage from his reverie and he glanced up to see Mitarashi Anko lingering in the doorway. Sarutobi raised a weathered hand, beckoning her to approach. The kunoichi did as he asked. “What troubles you, Anko?”

“I’m sorry, Hokage-sama,” she said quietly, her tone and posture subdued. “No matter what I do, I can’t help but feel responsible for all of that’s happening…”

The Hokage was silent for a moment. “How do you mean?”

Anko closed her eyes, remembering her last encounter with the Sannin. She recalled how she’d come across him in the Forest of Death, too late to stop his latest scheme from being set into motion. Her hand crept up to her neck absently. “I wasn’t able to stop him…”

“He is a formidable opponent for any ninja – you mustn’t blame yourself, Anko-chan.” Sarutobi closed his eyes wearily. “I doubt even I could have stopped him in time…”

She sighed, studying the old man with sad eyes. He’d been forced out of retirement at the death of his predecessor, fighting to protect his people and present a strong front to the other nations… “If only…” Her gaze wandered away from him to a wall displaying all the Hokages. It stopped on the image of the Fourth. “If only he hadn’t died…”

“You shouldn’t say such things,” Sarutobi admonished lightly. “The Yondaime made a great sacrifice… because of him, the rest of us were able to continue on living…”

“I know that…” she murmured. “But he was so strong… surely he could have—”
“It’s possible he could have,” the Hokage agreed. “But his time has passed. Now we have to look to the future generations… it will be up to them to protect this village after we are gone.”

She nodded lightly, a frown still etched across her face. “I hope they’re up to the task,” she said. “Cuz it might fall upon them sooner than they expect…”

oooo

Though the Konohamaru Corps. had taken the news of her true gender the best out of everyone she’d revealed herself to, Naruto was not so naïve to think everyone else would react the same way. After leaving the three students, the blonde found another alley to study her appearance once more.

‘I really do look like a girl…’ she marveled, studying her reflection in a puddle of water at her feet. A hand went up to her face, absently tracing the whisker-like scars on her cheek. With a small frown, she closed her eyes and concentrated. When she opened her eyes again, the marks were gone.

Now she looked like a normal blonde girl. ‘Normal…’ “Huh…” Satisfied with her work, she turned and jogged the rest of the way to the hospital.

oooo

“Oh no, he’s done it again!”

The nurse sitting at the Nurses’ Station in the main lobby glanced up, frowning in confusion at the frantic nurse rushing towards her. “Who’s done what again?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

“The patient in room 215,” she explained, pausing at the desk to catch her breath. “He’s managed to sneak out of his room again!”

“Again?” She sighed loudly in exasperation, reaching for the phone next to her. “I’ll call his Sensei. Really, this has got to stop!”

The other nurse nodded. “He couldn’t have gotten far in his condition,” she said. “I’ll check outside.” Jogging out of the lobby and through the double doors to the main yard, she let out a gasp of surprise when the subject of her search came into view. “I found him!” she called. “He’s out here!”

The first nurse hung up the phone, rushing out to join her. There in front of the building was Rock Lee, struggling through a set of one-handed push-ups.

“Two hundred and ninety-three… two hundred and ninety-four…”

“Rock-san!” the nurses cried out as they sprinted to his side. “You have to stop this!”

The injured nin sent them a glare that halted their steps instantly. “Stay away from me!” he barked out, never breaking his stride. “I must complete 300 push-ups here and now… or I will have to complete 600 handstands! Two hundred and ninety seven…!”

“Push-ups? Handstands? That’s ridiculous! You’re supposed to be resting!”
“That’s right! Your injuries are very serious – you can’t have forgotten!”

The boy winced, though whether it was from his injuries or his words no one could be sure. “I cannot… let myself be defeated by this…!” Visions of Neji, Gaara, Naruto, and Sasuke swam before his eyes. He let out an anguished cry. “I cannot be left behind…!”

“Rock-san… please…” the first nurse pleaded, trained eyes taking in his flushed face and straining limbs. She wasn’t sure of how much more of these sessions his broken body could take. She didn’t understand it – why was he putting himself through this? “Please let us take you back to your room!”

“Lee…?”

Only the two nurses looked up at the call, taking in the sight of the unfamiliar blonde approaching them. She kept her eyes on their patient, her blue eyes dark in concern. Was she a friend of his perhaps?

“Please, miss,” the second nurse begged, drawing the blonde’s attention to her. “Talk some sense into your friend… he’s only hurting himself this way.”

“Please just leave me alone!” Lee yelled, not bothering to look up at the newcomer. “I—” The blonde knelt down beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder gently. He flinched, looking up at her in surprise.

She smiled gently. “You were on 297, eh?” she asked.

He nodded dumbly.

The two nurses gasped. “Miss…!”

The blonde glanced up at them. “Only three more and then he can go rest,” She paused, glancing back at Lee once more. “Right?”

Lee was silent a long moment, staring at her in awe. ‘She has very blue eyes…’ Remembering that she had spoken, he nodded and directed his gaze to the ground. “Thank you…” he murmured quietly.

She nodded. “No problem. Two hundred and ninety-seven…”

The taijutsu master nodded, lowering his body to the ground once more. “Two hundred and ninety-eight… two hundred and ninety-nine…” Sweat dripped down his forehead, causing his eyes to sting and blur. “Three hundred—” As he pushed his body up once more, his arm buckled under his weight, sending him crashing towards the ground. “Aghhh!”

“NO!” the nurses cried out!

“Hey, careful!” Lithe arms wrapped around Lee’s upper body, halting his descent. Blue eyes met his, shining in worry. “You don’t wanna break your other arm, do you? Then how would you do your 600 handstands?”

Lee flushed, letting out a weak laugh.
The blonde grinned, lifting him up and keeping him steady while he regained his bearings. “Thank you…” he murmured, slightly awed at the ease with which she’d managed to lift him; she was so tiny! “You are very strong for your size…”

The blonde let out an exasperated sigh. “You’re not that heavy, y’know,” she remarked casually. “S’pecialy since you don’t have on any weights.”

“True…” Lee paused. ‘Wait… how does she know I usually wear weights…?’ He glanced back down at her. “I’m sorry… but do we know each other…?”

Despite herself, Naruto blinked in surprise. ‘He doesn’t recognize me…?’ She paused, remembering the henge. ‘Can he not see through it…?’ Turning her attention back to him, she shook her head. “I heard about your fight in the exams from some friends of mine,” she said by way of explanation.

“I see…” Lee’s eyes were downcast as he slowly allowed the blonde to lead him back towards the building. He was too tired to argue - tired of everything… “Are you a ninja as well…?”

‘Crap… do I tell the truth…?’ Naruto blushed, letting out a nervous laugh. “Me? Oh no… I just happen to know a few, that’s all… it’s hard not to in a village with so many…”

The boy didn’t respond at first. “My injuries,” he murmured. “I may have to give up on being a ninja…” He remembered the devastation he’d felt when the doctor had given him the news. He could feel it welling up inside of him all over again. All those years, all that training… for nothing!

Naruto studied the boy, her face drawn in worry. What had happened to the old Lee? All posing, and grinning, and declarations of youth; that Lee hadn’t known the meaning of the word depressed! “Why? ’Cuz of what some doctor tells you? You must not have liked bein’ a ninja if you’re ready to give up!”

Lee stilled, turning to stare at her in awe.

Surprised by the intensity in his gaze, Naruto began to squirm in embarrassment. “What…?”

Lee grinned softly. “What you just said… It reminds me of something someone I know might say…”

“Oh… well…” She scratched her head, her cheeks still a dusty pink as she focused her sight on a point to her right. “They must be pretty smart if they’d say something like that.” She glanced back over at him. “You’re an amazing ninja, Lee. You’ve worked so hard to reach your level despite all the odds against you. You can’t give up now, you just can’t!”

Though he felt spurred by her words, there was still a sense of uncertainty. “I… do not know…”

“You don’t have to!” Naruto said encouragingly. “Just be strong, don’t doubt, and have faith in yourself. It may take a while, but you can do it!” She grinned. “Rock Lee will be a ninja again - believe it!”

He stared at her a few seconds before nodding with a smile. “You’re right…”

The two nurses watched the scene with awed expressions on their faces. A few encouraging words
from one little blonde had managed to lift his spirits so immensely. “Rock-san…”

Lee turned to them, bowing his head slightly. “I am sorry for my earlier behavior,” he apologized. “It is not like me to be so rude.”

“It’s all right, Rock-san!” the first nurse exclaimed. “We’re just glad you’re feeling much better.”

He nodded before letting out a loud yawn.

“All the same,” the second nurse replied, taking note of way his body sagged. Though the poor blonde was shouldering most of his weight, she didn’t make a single sound of protest. “It’s about time you headed back to your room to get some much-needed rest.”

“Yes…” He yawned again, shifting and unknowingly resting his head on top of blonde’s. She tensed slightly but made no attempts to move him. He inhaled deeply and a sleepy smile spread across his face. “Strawberries…” he murmured.

“Strawberries…?” the two nurses blinked.

“The scent of strawberries,” He closed his eyes with a sigh. “Just like Sakura-chan…”

Naruto sighed loudly, bracing his shoulders to keep him from falling over completely. “He’s asleep…”

“It was only a matter of time,” the first nurse sighed. “He’s pushing himself way too hard.” She smiled at the blonde sympathetically, reaching for Lee. “We’ll take him back to his room and make sure he rests up--”

“It’s all right,” The three looked up to see Gai standing behind them, his eyes on his unconscious student. “I can take him back.” He stepped over beside Naruto, lifting Lee up into his arms.

“I want to come, too,” Naruto replied. Gai glanced over at her, recognition suddenly entering his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but the blonde beat him to the punch. “I’d like to walk back with him… if that’s all right.”

The two nurses exchanged looks before giving an acquiescing nod.

With a bow to the two nurses, Naruto followed after the taijutsu master as he gently carried his sleeping student back to his room. As they went, Naruto took a moment to study his face - much calmer now than the last time she visited - and sighed.

Acting like a girl was definitely a lot harder than she expected it to be. ‘But…’ She smiled ruefully, folding her hands behind her back as she hummed a little tune. Gai glanced over at her briefly with a smile. ‘Thanks anyway, Neechan,'

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“Here I am, Ero-sennin!”

Jiraiya looked up from his musing, spotting the blonde approaching in the distance. “Hey, kid.”

Naruto stopped in front of him, pausing at the stoic expression on his face. She cocked her head in
“What’s with the look on your face?”

“Hm?” He shook his head, gazing back at the blonde. He quirked an eyebrow at the state of her hair. “What’d you do different?”

“Er,” She blushed, running a hand through blonde locks that - thanks to a vigorous round of shampoo and conditioning - refused to maintain its usual spiky, devil-may-care style. It hung down over her hitai-ate, giving the blonde a pixie-ish look. “Sakura-neechan gave me a make-over yesterday,” she explained. “I guess my hair hasn’t recovered yet.”

The Sannin chuckled. “Heh, it’s fine. I’m glad you followed my instructions.” He started walking, leading her to the spot that they would carry out the day’s training.

“Yep,” Naruto agreed, following behind him. “But now I’m ready to train!” She pumped a fist in excitement, her eyes bright and eager. “I’m gonna get this jutsu today - or die tryin’!”

Jiraiya flinched inwardly. ‘You don’t know how right you are…’ His eyes wandered to where her seal resided, his mind recalling his conversation with the Hokage. Though he wasn’t able to determine the full extent of Orochimaru’s meddling, the most obvious damage was clear every time she attempted to mold large amounts of chakra. ‘The Kyuubi’s chakra leaked through the seal when you were in danger… a point when you were close to death… By altering the seal, Orochimaru blocked off the integrating flow of human and youkai chakra.’ He frowned. ‘In order to access it again, we have to create a similar situation… There’s no other way…’

“…sennin… Ero-sennin?” Naruto tugged on his sleeve, frowning up at him in confusion. “What’s the matter with you? Did somebody torch one of your porn books or something?”

Jiraiya blinked. “Why would anyone wanna do that?” The blonde only gave him a look. “Anyway… here’s our spot.”

Naruto looked around at the small clearing surrounded by shrubbery before turning her attention back to the old man. “All right! I’m ready!” she exclaimed. “What do I hafta do?”

“You have to draw out the Kyuubi’s chakra,” Jiraiya explained. “As if your life depended on it.”

“Eh? Why’s that?”

A dark frown spread across the Sannin’s face that had the blonde cocking her head in confusion. “Because it does.” Before she could ask what he meant, he reached out and pushed her backwards.

The blonde let out a yelp of surprise as the move had her vaulting backwards into the bushes. Clearing the bushes, she found herself over the gaping mouth of a large ravine.

‘Wha… what the hell…?’

With nothing to grab hold of, Naruto fell into darkness.

~End Chapter 14
Chapter 15: The Power of Human Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

Naru learns something about herself and while the village learns something about Naru.

Chapter 15

It only took Naruto a few seconds to realize that she was falling rapidly towards the bottom of a deep, dark hole. It took even less time than that to realize that it was Jiraiya who had pushed her into it. What the genin was truly having difficulty with, however was just how she was going to get herself out of this situation… in tact.

Rushing winds pushing past her, Naruto turned her body, staring down into the vast darkness below her. ‘It goes on forever…!’ She gulped in fear as she thought of what would happen when she finally reached rock bottom. ‘No way! I’ve got to find a way out of here!’ Maneuvering her way over to a wall, she summoned chakra to her hands and feet in hopes of sticking to the one of the craggy rocks zipping past her. However, each attempt she made at climbing back up failed - her speed was just too great to allow time to gain proper grip or footing.

From high above her, Jiraiya watched her attempts with a grim expression. ‘It’s no use trying to get back up that way,’ he thought to himself. ‘The only way you’re getting out of this is by Summoning. If you can’t do that, you’ll die…’ He closed his eyes, grimacing at the thought. ‘It’s the only way… Forgive me, Yondaime-sama…’

Oblivious to his thoughts, Naruto continued her freefall, all the while wracking her brain for someone to escape a horrible death. Yet nothing she had tried so far had seemed to work; she was all out of ideas. “What do I do? What do I do?!” She stared down into the darkness helplessly, her eyes wide in terror. “Is this really how it ends? Am I really going to die here?”

~ “You must not have liked bein’ a ninja if you’re ready to give up now!” ~

The blonde started in surprise as words from conversations past suddenly sprung to her mind.

~ “You can’t give up now! You just can’t!” ~

~ “I don’t plan on dying today - I got dreams to fulfill!” ~

Hearing her own words - meant to encourage others - echoing loudly in her ears filled the blonde with new determination. There was no way she could just sit back and accept the situation as it was. She was Uzumaki Naru, damn it - she never took no for an answer!

Jiraiya had told her she needed the Kyuubi’s chakra to pull off a Summons. And to tap into that demonic chakra required a near-death situation. She smirked idly, ‘Don’t get much more near death than this…’
Her eyes focused and gleamed with newfound determination. “I’m not gonna die here… there’s too much I gotta do, too many people I gotta protect!” she exclaimed loudly. Images of all those she considered precious to her flashed before her eyes. “If it takes a Summons to get me outta of this mess, then that’s what we’re gonna do… YOU HEAR ME, STUPID FOX?!”

The world around Naruto flashed brightly for a moment before fading to black.

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Opening her eyes, Naruto found herself surrounded in familiar darkness. “Huh… this place again?” She rose to her feet, staring around to see if anything stood out. There was nothing; no sounds, no smells… ‘How annoying…”

~ SO…. MY JAILER COMES TO VISIT ME OF ITS OWN VOLITION…? HOW UNEXPECTED…~

The blonde froze at the voice. Low and smooth almost like syrup, but containing an underlying tone of sarcasm and bitterness. Like the darkness, it was also very familiar. She turned, trying to follow the sound of it. “That voice…” she murmured aloud. “I heard it back in Wave… and in the Forest of Death, too…!”

~ SO YOU DID, ~ the voice said dryly.

“B-but that can only mean…” It was only strength of will that kept her from jumping in surprise when the area around her suddenly flooded with dim light. A quick glance around determined she was standing in a large chamber of some sorts, the walls lined with drippy, waxy candles. However, what really grabbed her attention was the large cage standing right in front of her.

A large piece of paper was stuck in the center of the bars, displaying kanji that Naruto assumed was supposed to read ‘Seal’. The old parchment was weathered and torn at the edges and it looked as though something had been written over it. The writing was too faint to read so Naruto didn't give it too much thought.

‘Weird…” Deciding not to dwell on it, Naruto focused on the cage itself. Large pipes fed out of the large bars, winding up along the walls and into the various corridors leading out of the chamber. “This place is…”

~ HELL, ~ the voice cut in. ~ FOR ME ANYWAY. ~ There was a pause. ~ COME CLOSER SO THAT I MIGHT GET A CLOSER AT MY JAILER. ~

Confused, Naruto moved closer a few steps only to stop just shy of the large clawed paw that swatted the ground in front of her. “What the hell?!”

The voice laughed loudly, making the blonde’s ears ring. ~ HOW FOOLISH YOU ARE, LITTLE NAKED APE…~ the voice bellowed. ~ OH, IF ONLY I COULD DEVOUR YOU FOR WHAT WAS DONE TO ME…~

Naruto twitched in anger, a scowl making its way to her face. “Done to you…? Done to you?! You think I asked to have you sealed in me?” she shrieked angrily. “Do you think I asked to be beaten, abused, and ignored by people too angry and stupid to realize that I’m not you?” She
strode the rest of the distance to the large bars. She could just barely make out the outline of the large being sealed behind the bars. The fact that she was standing before the prison of the Nine-tailed fox demon barely registered in the face her outrage. “You’re just pissed ‘cuz you were dumb enough to let yourself get sealed by a human! Big freakin’ deal - try living my life and see how much you like it!”

The voice laughed again. ~ WELL, AREN’T YOU THE VICIOUS ONE…~ the voice’s tone was thoughtful. ~ I NEVER EXPECTED TO COME ACROSS AN APE LIKE YOU…~

Recovered from her rant, Naruto frowned in indignation. “I’m not an ape,” she growled. “I’m human.”

~ I SEE LITTLE DIFFERENCE ~ the voice sniffed indifferently. ~ YOU ARE ALL BENEATH ME. ~

‘What a jackass…’ Naruto thought to herself. “So says the demon trapped inside the so-called ape.”

~ YES… THE VERY SAME YOUKAI YOU’VE NO DOUBT COME TO FOR HELP. ~ the voice was smug. ~ ISN’T THAT SO…? ~

“I didn’t come for your help,” she replied, folding her arms across her chest. “I just came to let you know that as we speak I’m plummeting towards the bottom of a freakishly deep chasm.” She shrugged as if it didn’t bother her one bit. “I’m no expert on Physics, but I’m almost certain by the time I finally hit the ground, I’m gonna be pretty dead.”

The voice didn’t respond.

Naruto continued, “I only tell you this because I’ve learned a little bit about you in the past few months. I know this information is not good news for you.”

The youkai sealed within the cage snorted, blowing hot air in the blonde’s face. She didn’t flinch. ~ YOUR POINT…? ~

“My point,” Naruto replied. “Is the Kuchiyose no Jutsu is the only thing that’s gonna get us out of this mess. You may’ve chipped in a bit back in Wave, but for the most part you’ve spent a little over 12 years in here without having to do your share.” She stared up into the darkness of the cage, her eyes gleaming like polished steel. “As of right now, your squatting days are over!” She thrust out her open hand. “Kyuubi no Youko… IT’S TIME TO PAY WHAT YOU OWE!”

The chamber echoed with loud, malicious laughter. ~ IMPRESSIVE, LITTLE JAILER… IMPRESSIVE…~ the Kyuubi mused. ~ PERHAPS YOU’RE NOT A NAKED APE AFTER ALL… YOU’RE A GREEDY LITTLE KIT DEMANDING ITS SHARE, ~ Naruto balked at being called little, but otherwise remained silent, her hand still outstretched. ~ VERY WELL THEN, ~ the demon mused. ~ IT SHALL BE AS YOU WISH! ~

A lean hand shot out of the darkness of the cage, grasping Naruto’s hand tightly. Before she could even question what was happening, chakra was shooting through her veins like liquid fire. She closed her eyes at the pain, only to open them again to the rushing ravine below her. She wasted no time, nicking her finger and running through the necessary hand signs. ‘It’s now or never, Naru…” Thrusting her hand out before her, she forced the chakra to the surface. “KUCHIYOSE
Jiraiya started at the sudden surge of chakra and subsequent explosion, looking down into the ravine as it filled with smoke. ‘Did she actually do it…?’

“EHHH? WHAT IS THIS…? WHAT AM I DOIN‘ HERE…?”

Naruto opened her eyes, staring down at the large -- no, ginormous toad that halted her fall. The amount of chakra she had used had been huge, but not even Jiraiya’s toad had been this big! This one towered over the forest canopy like the mountain that overlooked their village. Was it possible to summon something this large with the contract? Had she done it wrong somehow?

She sat up, patting the orange, rubbery like surface beneath her. ‘Too weird…’ “Um… excuse me…?”

The toad paused, staring upwards with big yellow eyes. “EH? WHAT’S THIS NOW?”

“Not to be rude or anythin’, but who are you?” she asked.

“THAT SHOULD BE MY QUESTION, BRAT!” the toad bellowed, blowing acrid smoke from the pipe hanging out of the corner of his mouth. “AND JUST WHERE THE HECK ARE WE?”

Above them, hidden from view by the trees, the toad-sage slapped a hand to his face in mortification. “Arggh… of all the frogs to summon, she chooses him…”

“JIRAIYA!” The old ninja froze like a kid with his hand caught in the cookie jar. “WHERE ARE YOU?”

Knowing no good would come of the old toad discovering his location, Jiraiya jumped away to hide in a nearby tree.

The toad puffed at his pipe in annoyance. “THAT BUM!” he growled. “WHERE DOES HE GET OFF SUMMONING ME FOR NO REASON?!”

“But there was a reason!” Naruto exclaimed loudly. “And he didn’t call you, I did! And you still haven’t told me your na--hey!” A large tongue wrapped itself around her, lifting her up and repositioning her on the old toad's nose where he could see her clearly.

He studied her silently before speaking. “AND YOU HAVEN’T TOLD ME YOURS EITHER.”

She made a face. “I asked you first.”

The two stared at each other before the old toad closed his eyes, sighing in frustration. “I’M TIRED OF STANDING LIKE THIS - I’M GETTING OUT OF HERE.” Without giving the
blonde any warning, he heaved himself out of the large crevice with a single leap.

“Whoa! Hey!” Using her chakra to stick to him, the blonde growled when the toad finally came to a stop by the riverbank where they’d last attempted to summon. “Did you just forget you had a passenger?”

“PASSENGER?” the toad echoed. “HA! MORE LIKE A HANGER-ON!” He ignored her cry of indignation. “ONLY ONE PERSON’S EVER BEEN WORTHY OF RIDING ON MY HEAD AND HE’S LONG GONE.”

“And who’s that?” Naruto asked.

From his spot hidden in the trees, Jiraiya tensed.

“WHY THE KIROI NO SENKO FLASH,” the frog answered. “THE YONDAIME HOKAGE OF KONOHAGAKURE NO SATO!”

‘The ‘Yellow Flash’… Fourth Hokage…’ Naruto remembered reading all about the man considered the Hero of the village when she was younger, idolizing him all the while unaware of what he had sealed inside of her. Though she’d never seen pictures, she knew all about the giant toad he’d ridden whilst facing off against the Kyuubi. Staring down at the being beneath her, her eyes widened in realization. “Then that makes you Gamabunta, the Boss Toad!”

“BETTER BELIEVE IT, KID, AND SHOW SOME RESPECT!”

“I would have from the beginning if you’d just told me your name!” she shot back in annoyance. “How was I supposed to know it was you? I was barely a day old when Yondaime-sama died!”

Yellow eyes blinked at her. “YOU LOOK TOO SMALL TO BE 12.” Naruto twitched, restraining herself. “NOW WHERE’S THAT FOOL JIRAIYA? HE BETTER HAVE HAD A REASON TO SUMMON ME OR ELSE…”

“I’m telling you! Ero-sennin didn’t summon you, I did!” the blonde yelled. “He taught me the Summoning jutsu so I could learn to control my chakra!”

Gamabunta studied her once more, eyes narrowing slightly. ‘NOT DOIN’ TOO GOOD OF A JOB,’ he thought to himself. ‘SHE’S STILL BURNING THROUGH HER CHAKRA… PRACTICALLY GLOWIN’ WITH IT…’ True enough, the blonde was still surrounded by a faint purplish aura of chakra, giving her a bright almost otherworldly glow. He squinted, taking in her features, blinking when they seemed to stand out in his memory. ‘IS IT POSSIBLE THAT SHE’S…?’ “OI, KID!”

Naruto blinked. “Huh?”

“WHAT’S YOUR NAME?”

She paused before bowing her head slightly. “It’s Uzumaki Naru, Gamabunta-jiisama,” she answered. It was better to be polite, right?
“UZUMAKI, EH…?” The old toad closed his eyes. “MAYBE YOU SUMMONED ME AFTER ALL, KID… BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN ANYTHING…”

Naruto blinked in surprise. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? I’M THE TOAD BOSS! I DON’T LET JUST ANYBODY SUMMON ME! YOU HAFTA PROVE YOURSELF WORTHY!”

The blonde frowned slightly. “How do I do that?”

“HA, AS IF I’D JUST COME OUT AND TELL YOU!”

‘Damn it…’ Naruto bit her lip in frustration. What was the point of having a summoning contract if you couldn’t use it? But how to gain the Boss’ favor? It wasn’t as if she could just outright fight him - he was huge!

Her mind recalled a conversation she’d had with Sakura during their make-over session. The pink-haired girl had been trying to explain some of the advantages kunoichi had over their male counterparts. ~ “A kunoichi doesn’t always have to use force to win a fight,” ~ she’d said, grinning. ~ “Like our sensei in Courtesan training always used to say, ‘Work with what’cha got!’” ~

Naruto chuckled inwardly, remembering the turn their conversation took after that. She’d shown her teammate her first original jutsu, the Oroike no jutsu, laughing outright at the expression Sakura had made as a result. ‘Wait - can I use it on him?’ she thought to herself. ‘Nah… I doubt it’ll work on a frog… or… what if I tweak it just a bit?’ A fox grin spread across her face. “Gamabunta-jiisama!”

“WHAN...? YOU’RE STILL HERE?”

“Yup,” she grinned, bowing low. “I wanted to ask if I could become one of your subordinates!”

Gamabunta snorted. “WHAT USE DO I HAVE FOR A SHRIMP LIKE YOU?”

The blonde twitched once more, but managed to maintain her grin. ‘Can’t say I didn’t warn you…’

Jiraiya peered out of the leaves of his makeshift hiding spot, frowning in curiosity. He’d seen that expression more times than he could count on another blonde. It had never ended well for whomever it was directed towards. ‘What’s she got planned…?’

Oblivious to his scrutiny, Naruto kept her attention on the Toad Boss, clasping her hands together in front of her as she focused all the chakra she could manage to scrounge together. ‘Here goes…’ she thought. ‘Henge - Kawaii no jutsu!’

“EHHH?” Gamabunta blinked owlishly at the little blonde standing on the tip of his nose, staring up at him with big blue watery eyes - complete with little dazzling sparkles for extra effect - hands clasped together pleadingly.

“Oh, please…” she begged tearfully. “Puh-leeeeeaaasse, Gamabunta-jiisama… please let me be your subordinate…!”
The old toad’s mouth flapped like a fish’s out of water before he began nodding almost helplessly. “ALL RIGHT, KID… YOU CAN BE MY SUBORDINATE…”

“Really?” Naruto let out a whoop of joy. “Woo hoo! Yes, I did it! I did i--!” Once again, her chakra levels fizzled down to almost zero, and she collapsed in a dead faint. Unfortunately, doing so caused her to topple from Gamabunta’s nose to the ground below.

“No!” Jiraiya stood up with a jolt of fear. “A fall from that height’ll kill her!” Fortunately, before the old ninja could form a single seal, the blonde was snatched out of the air once more by the old toad’s tongue. The Sannin let out a sigh of relief as he watched Gamabunta rest her unconscious body gently on the ground.

‘Thank Kami…’ The danger passed, he sat back and smirked at the blonde’s cleverness. ‘To think a prank jutsu was able to beat a Boss Summons… I’ll have to watch myself around her from now on…’ He paused, his expression thoughtful. ‘But just in case the old man needs a bit more convincing…’ He withdrew the large scroll from his back, winging it towards the large frog.

“HM…” Gamabunta stared down at the scroll as it unfurled at his feet, revealing the names of all those who had signed Toads’ Contract. His eyes fell on the name on the last space, written in wide hiragana. He sighed heavily. ‘THAT JIRAIYA… I KNEW FROM THE MOMENT I LAID EYES ON HER THAT THIS CHILD HAD SUMMONED ME… WITH ALL THE CHAKRA SHE WAS GIVING OFF WHO ELSE COULD HAVE DONE IT…?’ His mind recalled the way she’d glowed with chakra - a mixture containing far more of the being’s she contained than her own. ‘IT’S A WONDER SHE HADN’T PASSED OUT SOONER THAN SHE HAD…’ He sighed once more before looking to the trees where he knew the Sannin was hidden. “NEXT TIME, JIRAIYA,” The sage jerked but kept silent. “MAKE SURE SHE DOESN’T OVER-DO IT! I CAN’T HAVE ANOTHER RECKLESS BLONDE IDIOT RIDING ON MY HEAD.” He lifted the blonde up with his tongue once more, gazing down at her face. “ONCE WAS ENOUGH.” That said, he hopped away to take her to the hospital, each thundering hop bringing him closer to the village.

Once he was far enough away, Jiraiya touched down on the ground beside the scroll. “Ah, Gamabunta… always giving me a hard time…” He chuckled lightly before turning his attention to the two names written on the end of the list. His eyes fell on Naru’s name before focusing on the one before hers. “Yes, once is enough…” he murmured, eyes saddening in remembrance. “I don’t want Naru to share his fate…”

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The staff and patients within Konoha’s hospital were thrown into a frenzy when the building’s foundation shook with the sudden earthquake that struck the village. Something big was approaching the building, something REALLY big. However, just when everyone thought they would all be crushed, the shaking finally ceased. Once they were certain the ceiling wasn’t going to come down on top of them, everyone ran to the nearest window, eyes widening in surprise at the sight before them.

Lying unconscious in the middle of a large, webbed footprint was a young girl bearing a hitai-ate of the Leaf. Acting quickly, nurses rushed out of the building to carry her inside. To everyone who recognized the blonde hair and orange jacket, a single thought ran through their minds…

“Uzumaki Naruto is a girl??”
Surrounded in darkness once more, Naruto only had one thing to say. ‘Hey, Kyuubi… ever heard of overkill?’

A smug voice answered, ~ OVERKILL? WHAT’S THAT…? ~

The blonde growled in annoyance. “Bastard…”

Shikamaru looked up from his game at the sudden movement from the occupant of the bed beside him, an eyebrow quirking in curiosity. “So, you finally decided to wake up, eh?”

Blue eyes fell on him, taking a few seconds before showing any signs of recognition. “Shikamaru…?” Taking note of her surroundings, and state of dress - namely a t-shirt and pair of shorts - she let out a yelp and ducked back under the covers.

The other genin chuckled. “Never thought I’d see a modest Naruto…” he remarked. “Though I don’t see the big deal… it’s not like you’re naked or anything.”

“Shut up, Shikamaru!” came a muffled yell. “Where’s my jacket?”

He pointed over to a chair across the room, where the jacket sat folded with her pants and sandals.

She peeked her head out following his hand, pouting at the distance. However, a few seconds later she shrugged, getting over it. “So, what’re you doin’ here?”

“What? I can’t stop in to see how an old friend’s doin’?”

The blonde blinked, flustered. “Old friend…? You mean you’re really not mad…?”

“About what?” Shikamaru rolled his eyes. “We went through this already, didn’t we? I mean, it’s not like Chouji or me ever bothered to ask if you were a girl or not - as if it makes a difference really.” Naruto cocked her head in confusion and he smirked. “You’re still loud and obnoxious, girl or boy.”

She punched him in the shoulder, chuckling. “Shut up, Shikamaru.” She paused, letting out a heavy sigh. “So, how many people know now?”

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Naruto, I heard from my mother who heard from our neighbor that heard from her grocer’s nephew’s girlfriend’s teacher’s doctor’s sister-in-law you showed up passed out in front of the Hospital… I’m pretty sure its safe to say that the cat’s outta the bag now…”

“Damn it…”

“C’mon, you would’ve had to come clean eventually… does it really matter that it happened this way?”

Naruto paused, before shrugging her shoulders. “I guess not.” ‘Especially since it’s not the secret I’m really worried about…’ She rubbed her stomach absently, gazing at the floor. There she caught sight of the basket of fruit sitting at her old classmate’s feet. “What’s with the fruit?”
“Hm? Oh that…” Shikamaru reached down into the basket, tossing her an apple. “It was for Chouji.”

“Chouji got hurt?”

“Nah,” Shikamaru grinned. “He got a bad case of indigestion from overeating.” Asuma had promised to take the Akimichi boy out to his favorite restaurant to keep him from forfeiting out of fear in the first round of exams. Chouji had kept the poor cigarette-smoking jounin at his word. “The doctors said he can’t have any of it so I’m stuck with it.”

“Ah,” A devious smirk spread across the blonde’s face. “We should go to his room and tease him with it.”

Shikamaru smirked once more. “See…? Haven’t changed a bit.”

oooo

Temari stood out on the balcony of their hotel room, surveying the village laid out before them. Konoha was nothing like Sunagakure - the fan-wielding kunoichi had to admit that it was actually quite beautiful. ‘Not that any of that matters, of course,’ she thought to herself with a frown. ‘It’s only a matter of time before all of it’s gone.’ She glanced over at her brother, currently leaning on the railing, staring back into the room with a bored expression on his face. “Only a few more days until the Finals…” she remarked idly.

“Yup,” he replied, running a hand through his sandy hair. “You think any of these Leaf guys know what’s in sto--”

“Shut up, Kankuro!” she hissed. “You never know who’s listening.”

“Oh, right. Sorry…”

The door of their hotel room slammed open on the two Suna nin froze, only to relax at the sight of their sensei, Baki. The older ninja scanned the room, his visible eye narrowing when it spotted them out on the balcony.

“Sensei…?”

Temari frowned at his expression. After the mysterious death of that Konoha Jounin, Baki had told them he was going back to Suna to report in to the Kazekage. Had he had some part in that somehow, she wondered? “Was there trouble at home?” she asked.

Baki’s frown deepened. “You fools!” he spat. The two siblings blinked in confusion. “I told you to keep an eye on him!”

There was no questioning who the jounin was referring to. Temari and Kankuro exchanged worried expressions before jumping to their feet and bolting to Gaara’s room. Once there, Baki slid open the door, revealing the space to be empty.

“No…” Temari’s eyes widened in terror. “I could have sworn he was here!”

“Find him!” Baki ordered, rousing them out of their shock. “You all saw how he was at the end of
the last round. He’s out there somewhere, thirsting for blood. We can’t allow him to screw things up now - not when we’re this close…”

The two genin nodded. “Yes, Sensei…” Temari murmured. “We understand…” Without another word, she and her brother vanished from sight.

Alone in the room, Baki slammed his fist against the doorframe, biting back a curse.

oooo

The members of Konohagakure Team 8 all sat in the shade of one of the trees lining their designated training ground, taking a break from training to enjoy a light lunch.

“Are you sure you should be straining yourself so soon, Hinata-chan?” Kiba asked around bites of his sandwich, studying the Hyuuga Heiress with worried eyes. “I don’t want’cha to get hurt!”

The quiet girl sipped at her tea, blushing nervously. “I-I’m all right, K-kiba-kun,” she murmured timidly. “I-I want to help Shino-kun train for the next round…”

“Thank you, Hinata,” the glasses wearing genin replied quietly. “Though you should still be cautious.”

She nodded. “I promise!”

Kiba sighed loudly. “Mannnn, it’s so not fair…” he groaned. “I would’a been training for the next round, too if I hadn’t lost my fight!”

“You underestimated your opponent,” Shino replied. “Take that lesson and learn from it.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” the dog ninja exclaimed. “You’ve only told me a million times!” He sulked, scratching behind Akamaru’s ear absently. “Still it sucks I had to lose to a shrimp like Naruto…”

“K-kiba-kun…”

“There’s more to Uzumaki than you’d expect,” Shino replied.

Kiba and Hinata looked at him in confusion. “Eh… what’re you talking about?”

“I’ve just heard some interesting news.”

“News, Shino-kun…?”

He nodded.

The Inuzuka boy let out a growl of frustration. “Would’ja stop tryin’ to be so dramatic?” he complained. “What is it? And what the hell does it hafta do with Naruto?”

“Naruto is a girl.”

There was a long stretch of silence.
The wind blew, the birds chirped, the squirrels chattered loudly in the trees; none of the three genin in the clearing spoke a single word. Until…

“I GOT BEAT BY A GIRL?!!”

Hinata keeled over in a dead faint.

oooo

Sakura signed her name in at the front desk on their sign-in sheet with a sigh, the action seeming so familiar now it she might have been able to do it with her eyes closed. First Sasuke, then Lee, now Naru… Hadn’t she warned her about Chakra Exhaustion?

‘Sheesh, Naru, when I told you to go spend some time with Lee-kun I didn’t mean for you to go and get yourself admitted as well…’ She sighed once more; it was just like the blonde to run herself into the ground. She and Rock Lee were far more alike than probably either of them realized. Deciding it was time to give her teammate a stern lecture, and possibly another makeover just for the hell of it, Sakura turned away from the desk, heading towards her friend’s assigned room. Stopping when she sensed another presence behind her, Sakura turned once more only to find the hallway empty.

“Hello…?” she called out. She waited a few seconds for a response, but when none came she shrugged and continued on her way. “Maybe I should go see Lee-kun first… Or better yet, I’ll go get Naru an’ I can go see him together!”

As she walked away, she never noticed the silent figure lurking in the shadows.

oooo

A loud grumbling shattered the silence of the small hospital room, causing Akimichi Chouji to sit up and groan in despair. To think that the doctors would put him on a rich food restriction! It was too cruel!

“Ah mannn… I’m sooo hungry…!” He glanced up at the sound of the door opening, his eyes lighting up at the sight of the delicious basket of fruit being held out. Remembering he couldn’t have any of it, he folded his arms and sulked. “Aw, c’mon, don’t tease me like that, Shika--”

The platinum-blonde head of his other teammate peaked around the door, grinning cheekily at him. “Hey there, Chouji!!”

“Ino…?” The stocky boy blinked and then grinned widely. ‘Score!’

oooo

He slowly opened the door in front of him, eyes falling on the sleeping figure in the bed. Staggers further into the room, glassy eyes narrowed with murderous intent. Sand leaked out of his gourd, slowly inching up and around his prey’s body. Unconscious, Lee made no sign of noticing.

“Finally…” Gaara murmured, slowly raising his hand. “I will put an end to you… I will KILL you…” He moved to close his hand, intent on crushing the boy within a cage of sand, but it wouldn’t budge no matter how hard he tried. ‘What’s wrong with my hand…?’
“What do you think you’re doing?”

Gaara stared down at the long shadow leading from his feet to the door, only to be knocked back a hard punch that had him staggering backwards in surprise.

“Naruto -- did you forget that I’d feel that punch, too?!”

“Ah-- sorry, Shikamaru! You all right?”

“I will be when I regain the feeling in my jaw…”

The redhead ninja turned his head, his eyes narrowing on the sight of the two Konoha genin glaring at him from the doorway. The boy holding him in his shadow didn’t stand out in his memory, but the other… ‘It’s her again…’ “You… I remember you…”

Intensifying her glare at the Suna ninja, Naruto clenched her fists angrily. “Yeah, I remember you, too,” she ground out. “I also remember that your fight with Lee is already over. You won. There’s no reason for you to be here.”

“I’m here to kill him.”

She and Shikamaru flinched in surprise. “Why?” the shadow user asked. “What’d he ever do to you?”

“Nothing.” Gaara answered simply. “I wish to kill him merely because I can.”

“What?!”

Naruto stared at his eyes, seeing no more emotion than she had before during the Preliminaries. ‘Those eyes… they’re so empty…’

“Killing just for the hell of it?” Shikamaru frowned in disgust. “What’re you… some kind of monster?”

“A monster…” If he was expected the boy’s expression to change, the shadow user was sorely disappointed. “I suppose I am…” The other two ninja stared at him aghast, but he didn’t notice. “Back in Sunagakure, I was born with a Sand spirit known as the Shukaku sealed inside of me.”

“Inside…?”

“I was created to be a weapon, a protector of my village…” he continued. “But for as long as I can remember I have been feared by everyone. My own father, the Kazekage, has tried several times to have me assassinated… because he fears me, the power I have within me, the weapon he created.”

Naruto let out a sharp gasp. Shikamaru glanced at her out of the corner of his eye before turning his attention back to Gaara. “Sounds to me like you have father issues,” he muttered. “You should be going after him, not somebody who never did a thing to you!”
“I don’t care.” Gaara responded dully. “I kill because I can… Because I failed the one purpose for which I was created, I used to ask myself… ‘Why do I exist?’”

The blonde in the room had gone very, very still.

“I could find no reason so I came up with one of my own…” Green eyes narrowed. “I live for only myself. I love only myself. I will kill everyone else other than me… only then will I be able to prove my own existence.”

‘This guy’s nuts!’ Shikamaru scoffed in disgust. “That’s just sick,” he spat. “Naruto and I sure as hell aren’t gonna just stand by and--” The blonde beside him jumped, taking a step backwards. Shikamaru frowned in confusion. “Naruto…?”

Blue eyes wide in terror, Naruto stared at Gaara. ‘Those eyes…’ Her whole body trembled. ‘I can see myself in those eyes…’ Her hands were clenched tightly, her nails biting into her palms. ‘I… I could have been just like him…’

Shikamaru was deeply concerned now. He’d never seen the blonde like this before. “Naruto, snap out of it!” Unfortunately, with his attention focused on her, his concentration slipped and caused the Kagemane no Jutsu to cancel itself out. “Crap!”

Gaara stared at his hand briefly before bringing his gaze back up towards them once more. His eyes showed no change. “Don’t get in my way,” he warned. The sand fell away from Lee’s bed, rising up around the boy like a wave, threatening to crash down upon them.

The room door slid open, revealing Maito Gai standing on the other side. He gazed at the three genin, his brows furrowing. “What’s going on in here?” He focused his attention on Gaara, frowning slightly. “Save it for the arena.”

Gaara stared at him, his eyes slowly widening as he recalled his intervention in his fight with Lee. The dark haired Jounin shielding his student was replaced by another man, a sandy-haired blonde with kind blue eyes…

‘No… NO!’ Gaara let out a low groan, leaning forward and clenching his hands at his head. He staggered past the three of them, vanishing into the hallway.

Once he was gone, Shikamaru let out a loud sigh of relief. “Thank goodness for that!” he exclaimed, rubbing his neck. “I knew I shouldn’t have gotten involved…”

Gai stared out into the hall, a little concerned when there was no sign of the redhead. ‘That boy…’ He glanced back in the room, his eyes falling on the visibly shaken blonde. ‘Just what is he…?’

oooooooo

Sakura opened the hospital room door, poking her head in with a grin. “Hey, Naru-kun!” Finding the room empty, she blinked in confusion. “Huh…? Where’d she go?”

oooooooo

After another day of recovery - by the time Sakura had finally tracked her team mate down, she threatened to break her knees if she didn’t stay in bed and rest - Naruto was finally allowed to leave
the hospital. The incident in Lee’s room gone from her mind, the blonde had only one thing on her mind - finishing up her training.

‘I’ve got one more day to prepare for the next round,’ she thought to herself, walking through the village. Now that she knew she could summon, she wanted to make sure she had the Chakra Shield down - she’d certainly be needing it. Especially against Neji… ‘I hope I can beat him,’ she thought to herself, only to stop and shake her head. “Of course I can! I’m Uzumaki Naru, damn it!”

Several passersby gave her strange looks, more for her random outburst than for who she was, but the blonde ignored them.

“N-n-n-naruto-kun?”

The blonde turned at the stuttered call, grinning at the sight of the familiar brunette standing behind her timidly. “Hinata-chan!” she cheered, running up to her. “You’re okay! I’m sorry I didn’t get to visit you -- those guards are real jerks -- but I see you’re doing just fine. You are fine, right?”

The dark-haired nodded, smiling shyly. “I-it’s all right… I’m fine now…”

Naruto nodded, her grin widening. “I’m glad to hear it.” She paused, studying the other girl curiously. It was obvious the girl had sought her out for some reason, but why? “Is something wrong?”

Hinata blushed heavily, pressing her fingers together in front of herself nervously. “I… I… um… that is…”

“Hm?”

“N-naruto-kun… I…” She paused, gulping. She could do this! She wouldn’t back down! Staring at the blonde resolutely, she cried out, “I want you to spar with me!”

“Eh?” Blue eyes blinked in surprise. “Really?”

The Hyuuga heiress nodded, a bead of sweat running down her forehead.

“All right then.” Now it was Hinata’s turn to blink. “But we gotta take it easy. I just got released from the hospital - I don’t wanna get put back there before the finals.”

Hinata only giggled, letting the blonde lead the way to her training spot.

oooo

Naruto led the two of them to a spot outside of the village, a little forest clearing she’d come to regularly to train when she wanted to test the extent of her abilities when she didn’t want anyone to see. She turned to face the pale-eyed girl, grinning once more.

“I guess we should keep it simple, ne?” she suggested. “Taijutsu only.”

Hinata nodded in agreement, sliding into the first stance of the jutsu. “I’m ready, Naruto-kun.”
She nodded, rushing towards her pulling her fist back to strike. Hinata almost jumped back, but stopped herself, extending her own arm to block her blow. With the blonde off-balance, she brought up her free hand for a strike of her own. The blonde quickly deflected the blow, bouncing backwards a step before renewing her attack once more.

‘I… I can see it now…’ Hinata thought to herself, watching the blonde’s movements with pale eyes. Though the style wasn’t one she recognized, Naruto moved like accustomed to disguising her natural movements. Like a girl pretending to move like a boy. At a few failed strikes, she shifted track, her movements becoming more fluid and natural. ‘I should have seen all along… but I didn’t want to… I’m no better than any of the others…!’

Though Naruto remained oblivious to the girl’s thoughts, her own thoughts ran along a similar vein. ‘Her style is different…’ she observed as she dodged another of the girl’s strikes. Although she did hesitate and second-guess her strikes a few times, Hinata was fighting more aggressively than she had during her own bout in the exam. ‘It’s almost as if she’s mirroring someone else…’

The blonde was barely able to block the blow to her side when the revelation hit her. She had thought it strange that the normally timid Hinata would request a sparring match with her, but now it all made sense. ‘She’s fighting like Neji! She’s trying to prepare me for my fight against him!’ She paused, slightly confused. ‘But why…?’

Hinata pushed forward and Naruto moved to meet her, both girls moving to strike each other only to stop at the last possible second. Breathing heavily, both stared at each other without moving a muscle.

Naruto pulled back first, a wide fox-grin threatening to split her face in two. “Hinata-chan, you rock!”

The Hyuuga heiress blushed. “I-I’m not…I mean, I-I don’t…”

“Of course you do! Why would you think differently?”

Staring down at her feet, Hinata flushed in shame. “I… I thought you were a boy…”

The blonde blinked and then shrugged. “You weren’t the only one.” she said. “You’re not mad, are you?”

“N-no!” She stared down at her feet once more. “Just surprised… that’s all…”

“Still not the only one,” Naruto grinned. “Man… Shikamaru wasn’t kidding when he said the cat was out of the bag…” She scratched her head thoughtfully, pausing when a gleeful grin spread across her face. “I wonder how Neji’ll react when he’s beaten by a girl.”

Hinata paused, remembering her original reason for seeking the blonde out. “N-naruto-kun,” she called out. The other girl glanced over at her. “Please… don’t be too hard on Neji-niisan…” The blonde gawked at her. “He’s angry…” she explained. “H-he’s been hurt very much by the Main family…”

Naruto frowned. “That’s no excuse for him nearly killin’ you, Hinata.”

“I know…” She looked down, wringing her hands worriedly. “B-but I still care about Neji-nisan… No matter what, we’re still family…”
“Family, huh…” The blonde’s eyes took on a faraway look.

“N-naruto-kun…”

Sighing loudly, Naruto turned her attention back to Hinata with a resolute expression on her face. “I’m still not gonna go easy on him,” she said. Hinata’s face fell slightly. “But… I’ll do my best to make him understand, mark my words!”

Hinata sighed in relief, letting a smile of gratitude spread across her face. “Thank you, Naruto-kun!”

The other girl grinned once more. “Just promise me you’ll sit next to Kiba when you come watch our fight an’ we’ll be even.”

She ‘eeped’, her cheeks turning a dusty pink. “K-k-kiba-kun?” she squeaked. “Why is that…?”

If it were possible, Naruto’s grin widened even further, her eyes shining mischievously. “Because he likes you!” she answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. The dusty pink on Hinata’s cheeks turned a cherry red. “Even I could see that!”

Hinata could not think of anything to say.

oooo

Elsewhere, Kiba let out a loud sneeze. Akamaru barked at him curiously. He grinned. “Nah, I’m not sick, Akamaru,” he assured. “Somebody must be talkin’ about me…”

His older sister, Jounin Veterinarian, Hana grinned at him roguishly. “That’s assuming they have anything good to say.”

Her three ningen, the Sankyodai, smirked.

“Aah, shut up, Neesan!”

Akamaru barked in amusement.

oooo

“But enough about that,” Naruto continued. “All that exercise made me hungry. Wanna go get some ramen?”

“Um… sure, Naruto-kun…”

Naruto laughed. “You can call me Naru if ya want.”

“O-okay… Naru-kun…”

~End Chapter 15
Chapter 15b: Fate is...

Chapter Summary

“I don’t believe in Fate,” Naruto replied quietly. “I decide my own path.”

Chapter 15-b

Before anyone knew it, the day had finally arrived - the next round of the Chunin Exams was about to begin. People from all around the Shinobi Nations - dignitaries, politicians, and commoners alike - packed themselves into Konoha’s stadium, waiting anxiously for the much-anticipated event to begin.

The fights’ participants stood lined up together in the center of the arena, also anxious - if not more so than the spectators - for the upcoming fights.

Some more than others.

Shikamaru had his usual bored scowl fixed to his face, his eyes scanning the crowd surrounding them. ‘Man… I can’t wait to get this over with…’

He glanced down the line of genin standing before the audience, (‘Probably to give those foreign big-wigs time to place their bets,’ he muttered to himself); of the eight participants slated to fight that day, only seven of them were present.

His gaze fell on the blonde standing beside him, fidgeting like a four year old on a sugar buzz. “Oi, Naruto… where’s Sasuke?”

The blonde stilled, forcing an indifferent expression to her face. “Beats me…” she sniffed. “I haven’t seen him.”

Unbeknownst to them, Temari and Kankuro cast worried glances over at Gaara.

“Che… this is just like Kakashi-sensei…” she continued. “You don’t think they’ll disqualify him, do you?”

“Disqualify the Uchiha?” Shikamaru rolled his eyes. “Not likely…”

Naruto opened her mouth to make another comment, stopping when she noticed the unfamiliar Jounin approaching them. He walked with that same annoying laidback swagger as Kakashi, but sported a bored expression similar to Shikamaru’s. A senbon hung casually from his lips.

“All right, you lot, time to pay attention.”

“What happened to the wheezy guy?”

The Jounin paused before answering. “He’s not here. I’m Shiranui Genma, your new
proctor.” He turned his attention towards the audience. “Now it’s time for the first match of the Finals to begin!” As the arena exploded in loud cheers, he glanced back at the genin standing behind him, Neji and Naruto in particular. “Hyuuga, Uzumaki, you two stay. The rest of you clear the field.”

The others did as he said, Shikamaru hanging back a little to turn to the blonde. “Oi, Naruto,” he called. She glanced up at him, her expression curious. He smirked. “Good luck.” She grinned at him. Satisfied with her response, he turned and followed after the others.

Only she, Genma, and Neji remained.

oooo

Though as a Hyuuga she was usually afforded a box seat in the VIP section with the rest of Konoha’s dignitaries and their families, Hinata had no desire to sit next to her father and younger sister. Opting instead to follow Naruto’s advice, the shy heiress sought out her teammate not competing in the exams. When she finally spotted him, and the wide happy grin he sported at the sight of her, she wondered if maybe the blonde had had the right idea after all.

~ “Because he likes you!” ~ she’d told her, grinning like a Cheshire cat. ~ “Even I could see that!” ~

“Hinata-chan!”

“K-kiba-kun…” She waved as she approached him, certain her face was as red as a tomato. “And Akamaru, too…” The small dog yapped happily in greeting. “I-I was looking for you…”

If it were possible, the dog-nin’s grin widened even further. “Really? Ya wanted to sit next to me?”

She bobbed her head up and down. “If-If that’s all right…”

“Course it’s all right!” He moved over a seat, still grinning. “How’re you feeling, Hinata-chan? Ya had us worried when you fainted the other day…”

“I didn’t mean to worry you…” she apologized. “I really am doing a lot better…”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he said honestly. “Team 8 just isn’t the same without Hinata-chan… right, Akamaru?”

The dog barked in agreement and Hinata giggled, petting his head. “And how about you, Kiba-kun?” He blinked at her. “How are you feeling?”

“Ah, I’m fine! That ointment you gave me did wonders!” He blushed slightly. “You’re a real lifesaver, Hinata-chan.”

She eeped, ducking her head slightly. “I’m… I’m glad that I could help…”

Kiba smiled at her once more before turning his attention to the arena floor. The two genin remaining were staring each other down, just chomping at the bit for the proctor to give the go ahead for the fight to begin. “Man, those two look serious down there.” Hinata followed his gaze, frowning slightly. “There’s no way I’d wanna be in Naruto’s shoes right now…” He paused,
shuddering. “Goin’ against your cousin Neji? Not a chance…”

She nodded slightly, pale eyes focused on the two of them. ‘But Naruto will be just fine… won’t she…?’


Several levels up in the Hokage box, Sarutobi glanced up as the Yondaime Kazekage arrived with his entourage. “Ah, Kazekage-sama, I’m glad you could make it.”

The shrouded kage inclined his head politely. “As am I, Hokage-sama,” he said smoothly. “I would not wish to miss this event for all the world. I hear the last of the Uchiha Clan is participating this year.”

The Hokage nodded. “Yes, that’s correct. However, this first fight will feature Hyuuga Neji and Uzumaki Naruto. It promises to be an interesting match.”

The Kazekage made a noncommittal sound.

Glancing down into the arena, the Hokage’s eyes fell on the small blonde. He’d heard quite a bit about her in the past few weeks. ‘You’ve certainly got everyone’s attention now,’ he thought to himself. ‘I wonder how you will fare… Naru…’


Genma studied the two genin on either side of him, acutely aware of the fierce glares they were directing towards each other. Having heard a bit about their almost-altercation during the first half of the exams, he had no doubt these two had been preparing for this moment ever since.

‘This is certainly gonna be interesting…’ Adjusting the senbon in his mouth, he cleared his throat to gain their attention. “All right you two,” he began. “The rules are the same as before - this is not a death match. I can stop the fight at anytime if I think it’s gone too far, got it?”

Neither genin answered, choosing instead to stare the other down.

‘Okay then…’ Stepping back several paces, Genma raised his hand into the air and brought it down quickly. “Begin!”

Neji shifted, studying the blonde in front of him.

Naruto scowled. “You gonna just stare at me all day,” she growled. “Or are we actually gonna fight?”

The Hyuuga boy merely scoffed. “I’m merely trying to figure out what the big deal is,”

“The big deal, huh?” She blinked, then smirked. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to undress me with your eyes.”

He blinked, nearly taking a step back in surprise. “What did you say?” he snarled.

Naruto shrugged absently. “Those eyes of yours can see through just about everything, right? It comes as no surprise you’d use them that way.” She reached for her jacket, slowly unzipping it,
shrugging out of it, and tossing it to the side. “Lemme save you the trouble… you’re gonna need all the chakra you have to take me on.”

From the sidelines, Genma had to hold back a snicker. ‘Heh, this kid’s got spunk, I’ll give her that.’

Neji eyed the form-fitting black vest Naruto wore, narrowing his eyes in distaste. “So, the rumors are true after all…” He scowled. “It makes sense now, given how ridiculously you behave.”

The blonde merely smirked at him. “That sounds a little chauvinistic, Hyuuga-san,” Her eyes gleamed dangerously. “I’m starting to think you prodigies are all the same.”

“As are all failures like you,” he countered. “You should know you don’t have a chance. You can’t defeat me so you should just give up.”

“Ha! If I had a 100 yen for every time somebody told me that I’d be the richest ninja alive!”

The Hyuuga boy sighed, shaking his head. “It’s simply a matter of Fate,” he explained as if he were speaking to a toddler. “A failure like you who is the last in your class shall remain a failure always, whereas I--”

“Am I genius, blah, blah, blah,” Naruto reached into her weapons pouch, punctuating her words with a hail of shuriken. “I’ve heard all that crap before!”

Quick to act, Neji withdrew a kunai from his own weapons pouch, blocking the assault. Wasting no time, he activated his Byakugan rushing forward with a hand trailing chakra.

Seeing the hand aiming for her chest, Naruto yelped, flipping up and over him. “You pervert!” She grabbed another shuriken, hurling it at him. “Did you just try to grope me?”

“As if I would stoop to such ridiculous tactics,” he sniffed, dodging the projectile.

“So you were trying to kill me?” she scowled at him, although in reality she was watching the shuriken hurtle its way back around towards them like a boomerang. “Didn’t Proctor-san say this wasn’t a death match?”

“I have no control over what happens. What will be, will be.”

“I think that’s a load of crap,” Naruto spat, watching as the shuriken got closer and closer to its target. ‘Now!’

Neji suddenly turned, knocking the shuriken aside with his kunai, before aiming a spinning kick at the blonde’s midsection. She yelped and jumped back, her eyes wide in surprise. “How did you…?”

“You don’t know anything do you?” he asked, still smirking. “My Byakugan allows me to see every move you make, no matter what direction you make it from.”

Naru scowled. ‘Of course…’

oooo
Up in the stands, with Ino and Chouji, Sakura contemplated the Hyuuga boy’s words with ever-mounting worry. “He can see in multiple directions?”

“It sure looks that way,” Chouji replied, munching happily on a bag of potato chips. “I guess the Byakugan is a lot stronger than the Sharingan... ack!! Ino!”

Ino pulled back her fist, glaring at her teammate. “Bite your tongue, Chouji!” she snapped. “The Sharingan is way cooler than Neji’s Byakugan! If it were Sasuke-kun fighting down there, he’d have beaten him in no time flat!”

“Hey, don’t count Naruto out just yet!” the Akimichi boy countered.

“I’m not! I’m just sayin’!”

Sakura remained silent, her hands clasped in worry. ‘Will Naru be all right?’ she wondered to herself. ‘She doesn’t have the Sharingan... or any other kekkei genkai that I know of... all she really has is...’

oooo

“So you say you can see in more than one direction, ne?” Naruto shifted, raising her hands into a familiar cross seal. “Then I’ll just have to come at you from all sides at once! KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!”

Seven clones appeared in a circle around Neji, and together with the original Naruto converged on him simultaneously.

‘Ridiculous,’ the Hyuuga snorted to himself. ‘Doesn’t she realize that the Byakugan can tell a clone from a real person...? It--’ He paused, his brows furrowing in confusion. While his eyes told him that all eight figures descending down on him were solid, they were unable to determine which of the blondes was the real one and which was the fake. All the chakra levels were even. ‘But that’s not possible... no one has enough chakra to do that!’ The clones gave a yell as they raised their arms to strike, snapping the boy out of his stupor. Using the Jyuiken, he struck tenketsu points on all the blondes that confronted him, poofing them out of existence until only one remained. “Now it’s time to finish you off!” Drawing chakra to his raised hand, he rushed towards the other genin head on.

Blue eyes widened at his speed. ‘Crap, there’s no time to dodge him! Guess I got no choice!’ Raising her hands into a quick seal, Naruto raised a small Chakra Shield, blocking his strike just before it connected.

“What the heck was that...?” Kiba wondered.

Hinata had no answer.

Genma blinked in surprise, as did Sarutobi.

“What...?” Neji gawked.

The blonde grinned triumphantly. ‘Good, it worked!’ Glancing up at the boy above her, her grin turned devious. “They’re called boobs,” she teased. “Haven’t you ever come across them before?” He sputtered in outrage, giving her time to flip backwards out of his range. Raising her
hands into the cross seal once more, she called out, “KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!”

“Pulling the same trick again?” Neji scowled to cover up his embarrassment. How dare she try to ridicule him like that? Branch member though he may be, he was still a Hyuuga!

“Please, Neji, I’m a Prank Master! I never perform the same trick twice!” She and each of her three clones hurled shuriken at him.

Neji jumped up and over the attack, flipping to land safely out of their strike zone.

“Very nice,” Clone #2 called.

“But let’s see if you can dodge this one!” Simultaneously, Naruto and each of her clones slammed their palms to the ground, hauling up a large spear-shaped chunk of ground. “Uzumaki Chakra Spade!” They each lifted their rock over their heads, hurling at the boy with all their might.

Watching the projectiles spinning towards him, Neji scowled. Shifting his feet, he closed his eyes in concentration, his body going into a spin.

In the V.I.P box, Hyuuga clan Head, Hyuuga Hiashi, gasped as his eyes widened at the sight of the familiar attack. “That’s…”

“What…” Naruto stared in confusion.

“KAITEN!” A whirlwind of chakra rose up around Neji like a protective wall just before Naruto and her clones’ attack struck. The spears of rock hit the wall, breaking apart into small shards and scattering across the arena.

To protect Naruto from the backlash, her clones jumped in front of her, taking the brunt before poofing out of existence. ‘What... what the hell was that...?’

Tenten stared at the aftermath of her teammate’s attack, her eyes wide in awe. “So it actually worked…”

“Chichiue,” Hiashi gazed down at his youngest daughter, Hanabi. The young girl was staring at her cousin, her brows furrowed in confusion. “That attack just now… what was it…?”

“The Kaiten, or Heavenly Spin.” he answered. “An attack used in conjunction with the Jyuuken by the Main Family.” He paused, studying his young nephew. ‘And yet Neji used it so flawlessly…’

Prodigy of the clan though he may be, Neji had still been sorely underestimated. Hiashi glanced over to his right, at the seat that was supposed to be occupied by his eldest daughter. ‘In more ways than one…’

Surveying the scratches and bruises she had sustained despite her clones’ attempts, Naruto smirked, sighing resignedly. “Well damn…” she muttered. “I certainly didn’t expect anything like
“And that is why you will lose,” said Neji as he rushed towards her again. With no time to dodge or block, Naruto was knocked back by a hard blow to the arm. “I’ve closed several of your tenketsu,” he explained. “You should give up… that arm is useless to you now.”

The blonde frowned at the arm dangling helplessly at her side before reaching into her kunai pouch with her good one. “You forget that I have two,” she replied with a grin. “And why should I give up when I still have a chance of winning?”

“A chance?” he scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous. A failure is born a failure, and will die a failure.” He paused, scowling. “You should just accept your fate quietly. Or have you forgotten what happened to Lee?”

“I don’t believe in Fate,” Naruto replied quietly. “I decide my own path.”

“You only think you do,” he snorted. “But it’s inevitable - you’ll come to realize how hopeless it all really is.”

The blonde stared at him a few moments before rolling her eyes. “Sheesh, how annoying… are you always this depressing?”

Neji scowled darkly. “Such is my life as a member of the Branch family,” he snarled. “But of course, you would never understand. You’ve never been branded with a mark that sets you apart from everyone else!”

Naruto tensed, staring down at the ground. “You’re wrong,” she whispered. “I know what it’s like… better than you think…” Lifting her head, she fixed him with a steely glare. “But it makes no sense to take your anger out of Hinata - she never did a thing to you!”

Up in the stands, Hinata lowered her head.

“You’re wrong…” Neji growled. “It is because of her that I was branded!” The blonde’s eyes widened in surprise in confusion. “Her father and mine were brothers… Identical twins… but because my uncle Hiashi was older - by mere seconds - he was made a member of the Main family while my father Hizashi was forced to become part of the Branch line.”

The boy reached for his hitai-ate, pushing it back to reveal a curious x-shaped mark on his forehead. “Like all Branch members, he received this mark,” he explained. “Labeling him as Hiashi’s servant… inferior to him.”

“Years ago, a ninja of Kumogakure kidnapped Hinata in hopes of stealing the Byakugan and learning its secrets. My uncle killed him, only later to learn he was a dignitary who had just signed a peace treaty with our village. In order to prevent war, Kumogakure demanded my uncle’s head.”

Naruto frowned, not liking the direction this story was heading. “What happened…?” she asked hesitantly.

“Couldn’t you guess? They sent my father instead.” He ignored her gasp of horror, pushing his hitai-ate back into place. “So you see, that is the inevitability of Fate. The fact that being born only seconds later than my uncle led my to my father being sentenced to death. The fact that though I am far more valuable to our clan in terms of skill, I will always be seen as inferior because
of this mark…” His eyes narrowed as he stared at the blonde across from him, shifting his weight on his feet. “Everyone’s fate is sealed, just as yours is today!” He sprung forward, hands flashing forward through the Jyuukan’s offensive attack. “HAKKE! 4 hands, 8 hands, 16, 32, 64 hands!”

Each strike hitting her at a different tenketsu point, Naruto let out a scream as she was flung backwards. She hit the ground with a loud thud, lying still.

“NARUTO!” Sakura screamed.

Hinata let out a sharp gasp, clutching at her chest as she keeled forward.

“Hinata?!” Kiba called out worriedly.

Neji turned to Genma, his face etched deeply in a scowl. “It’s over.”

“No, it isn’t…” The blonde struggled to her feet, gasping heavily. “I’m… not finished… yet…!”

The Hyuuga narrowed his eyes.

“I’m sorry…” she gasped. “That your family’s a bunch of jerks… but you shouldn’t spout all that crap about Fate…” She groaned, straightening her spine as she turned to face him once more. “If it bothers you so much, do something about it!” Slowly and painfully, she raised her hands into the cross seal once more.

“You’re wasting your time,” Neji scoffed. “There’s no way you can draw out chakra with your tenketsu closed. Give up.”

“No. I don’t give up… and I don’t run away…” Blue eyes narrowed on him. “’Cuz that’s my nindo!”

Neji scowled, recounting his fight with Hinata.

~ “I will never give up… I will never run away. That is my nindo.” ~

Unbeknownst to him, the subject of his thoughts was sprawled out on the ground, despite a worried Kiba’s attempts to rouse her.

“Hinata!” he called out. Had the stress been too much for her so soon after her injury? “Hinata, please wake up!” When the pale girl didn’t respond, he bit his lip harshly, his eyes dark with worry. ‘Damn Neji for doin’ this to her,’ he thought savagely to himself. ‘Naruto… you better kick his ass!’

Hinata let out a short whimper of pain and he tensed. “Somebody help! We need a doctor over here now!”

Naruto tried to draw chakra from her reserves, frowning inwardly when she was unable to draw any forth. Closing her eyes in concentration, she recalled the chamber her mind had gone to during her fall in the ravine. ‘Oi, Kitsune!’ she called. ‘I’m about to teach Hyuuga-bastard a lesson. I
‘need your chakra!’

There was a slight pressure at the back of her mind, followed by that same low, silky voice from before. ~ *I HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN YOUR ‘TERMS’, LITTLE JAILER…* ~

Naruto nodded, smirking inwardly. ‘And none of that overkill crap like last time! I’ll take what I need as I need it, go it?’

There was a smug chuckle. ~ **VERY WELL.** ~

Neji blinked in surprise as chakra slowly started forming around the small blonde in front of him. ‘*But that’s not possible…*’ he thought to himself. ‘*How is she able to draw chakra with her tenketsu closed…?*’ He paused, activating his Byakugan once more. ‘*And why is it red…?*’

The red chakra became more visible around the blonde now, briefly coalescing in the shape of an animal’s head, hissing at him. He jumped back in surprise. ‘*What is she…?*’

Genma only stared with wide eyes.

In the stands, Hiashi leaned forward in his seat. Was this the same girl considered the village fool, the prankster child Uzumaki Naruto…? ‘*She not only calls forth the chakra, but controls it…?*’

Sarutobi’s thoughts ran along a similar vein. ‘*Interesting…*’ he mused to himself. ‘*It looks like your training methods worked after all… Jiraiya…*’

In the booth with all the other participating genin, Gaara stared at the blonde, his whole body shaking with the rush of youki washing over him. ‘*That’s no minor demon she houses, is it…?*’ His own demon had no answer for him. Gaara’s hands trembled at his sides, whether in fear or excitement he wasn’t sure he knew or cared. ‘*Uzumaki Naruto…*’

“…What *are* you…?”

Naruto stared at the boy in front of her, her eyes gleaming. “I’ve been called a lot of things…” she said. “A loser, a failure, a moron…” Her eyes narrowed slightly. “But I only consider myself one thing… and that’s UZUMAKI NARU, FUTURE HOKAGE!”

Neji growled, hurling a handful of shuriken her way in frustration. The blonde took a light step, vanish from his sight. “Wha…?”

“Whoa!” Ino exclaimed. “How’d she get so fast?!?”

Body tensed for attack, Byakugan eyes studying the area around him for any signs of the blonde. ‘*Where is she?*’ He caught a flash of movement behind him, turning and whirling a kunai in that that direction.

Naruto appeared out of thin air, while throwing her own directly towards him. The two blade sailed through the air, colliding with a metal clang. Ricocheting off of each other, the two kunai spiraled back towards each genin. Naruto caught Neji’s out of the air and he did the same with hers.

“It’s time to end this, Hyuuga!” she called, drawing chakra into the hand holding the kunai. Using the wall as a spring board, she charged towards him once again. “**CHAKRA SHIELD!!!**”
Neji prepared for her attack, pulling into a spin once more. “KAITEN!!!”

The two genin’s attacks met, their colliding of their kunai dwarfed by the sound of their two chakra attacks combining. The resulting explosion blinded nearly everyone in the stadium.

“NARUTO!” Sakura screamed when the light faded away, leaving her teammate nowhere to be found.

Silence fell over the stadium as everyone in the audience watched to see if either of the genin had survived.

‘Wow, they really went all out,’ Genma awed, studying the damage done to the arena grounds. He waved the dust and smoke from his eyes, spotting twin holes on opposite sides of the arena. No doubt where the two had landed after the explosion. ‘I wonder if they survived…?’

His question was answered by a low groan. A few moments later a hand emerged from the rubble, followed by Neji - dusty and bruised - but relatively in one piece.

Tenten let out a sigh of relief. ‘I’m glad he’s all right,’ she thought to herself. More of the smoke cleared, revealing the blonde unconscious on the ground several yards away. ‘I never expected Naruto to be a girl... let alone one so strong...’ She frowned in sympathy. ‘Still.. You weren’t quite as strong enough to beat Neji... Sorry, Naruto... or should I say, Naru...’

Neji staggered over to the blonde, scowling at her unconscious form. “Hmph... all that work for nothing...” His eyes narrowed. “In the end, all you had were just wor-- huh?”

The blonde suddenly vanished in a puff of smoke.

He gasped. “A clone?! But then--” He whirled around just as Naruto emerged from the ground behind him. Her fist collided with his chin, sending him vaulting into the air.

“Take that!” she yelled, smirking in satisfaction as he hit the dirt with a thud.

Groaning, Neji tried to sit up only to find that his limbs were too tired to obey his commands. The only thing he could do was stare up at the blonde as she made his way over towards him. “You beat me... with a clone...?”

She paused, scratching her head thoughtfully. “Ironic, isn’t it? Considering I can’t form a regular bunshin to save my life.”

“I don’t understand...”

“People get so caught up by life that they only believe what they want to... Why bother trying to change their perceptions?” The blonde frowned. “That’s not how I wanna live my life. If I’ve got the power to change things for the better, why should I sit back and do...”
nothing? ‘Cuz it’s Fate?’

Neji didn’t respond.

“Your dad’s gone, your life is difficult, but you work hard… You’ve become a ninja your family can boast about even if you’re only a Branch Member… Why settle for the hypocrisy of it if you can do something about it? If you don’t like how your family’s bein’ run, change it. Or…” She paused, grinning at him. “When I become Hokage, I’ll do it for you!”

The pale eyed boy stared at her, his face an open expression of wonder and confusion. There was so much hope and honesty in her face - as if she truly believed what she spoke. Despite everything, Neji found himself hard-pressed not to believe her. ‘Who… is this girl…?’ He sighed heavily, closing his eyes. “Okay…” That said, clan prodigy, and last year’s #1 Rookie, Hyuuga Neji, lost consciousness.

His senbon dropping to the ground, Genma continued to gape in surprise. “Well, I’ll be damned…” Remembering his job, he drew another senbon from his vest, clearing his throat. “Winner, UZUMAKI… NARU!”

The stadium erupted in loud cheers and applause.

In the stands, Hiashi nodded, rising to his feet. “Come, Hanabi.”

“Yes, Chichiue.”

oooo

Leaning against the railing, Shikamaru stared down at the arena. “She did it… She actually did it.”

“Way to go, Naru!” Sakura and Chouji cheered.

“I can’t believe it!” Ino awed, staring down at the blonde below. At the sudden cheering, the blonde had looked up, blinking in confusion. When she realized that the cheering was actually for her, she blushed and waved at the audience timidly. “Naru… you really are something else.”

Leaning back in his seat, Sarutobi watched the blonde with a fond smile. ‘Well done, Naru… well done…’

oooo

While Naruto basked in the praise of the audience, she remained unaware of the pale green eyes boring into her from the participants booth above. Gaara’s hands shook at his sides, but he paid no attention, his focus more on the blood lust surging through his veins.

‘Uzumaki Naru…’

End Chapter 15-b
Chapter 16: Hostility and Concern

Chapter Summary

The Prodigal Uchiha returns... Is he prepared for the match that awaits him?

Chapter 16

Neji stared at the small worn scroll in his hands, his white eyes wide in shock. The memory of his austere and revered uncle, Hyuuga Hiashi, kneeling prostrate before him still burned brightly in his mind's eye. To think that the leader of his clan would ever bow to him, a lowly member of the Branch Family, begging his forgiveness of all things!

Worse yet, with that apology had come an unsettling truth. His own father... to think the man who had held nothing but animosity towards the Hyuuga Clan and its caste system had willingly sacrificed himself to protect his brother.

The boy ran trembling fingers over the faded ink strokes written in his father's hand, a loud blonde's words echoing in his ears.

~ "...You shouldn't spout all that crap about Fate... If it bothers you so much, do something about it!" ~

If he thought about it long enough, Neji realized that Hizashi had done just that. 'He freed himself from the restrictions of the Branch Family seal... the Fate of being little more than a slave...' He paused, remembering the open emotion that had shown in his uncle's face when he had disclosed the truth of his father's death. It was a revelation for Neji, to be sure. To know that despite how he felt about his brother, his father had still cared about him, enough so to be willing to give up his own life for him.

For the first time since learning of his father's death years ago, Neji felt nearly overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness. His world felt as if it had been turned on its head – all of his beliefs had been built upon a single fact. Now that he had learned that single fact to be false, what did that mean for all his principals? Was everything he truly believed wrong?

~ "I don't believe in Fate. I decide my own path." ~

Was it really so easy? The blonde – who he had never expected in a million years to be strong enough to beat him – seemed to have so many odds stacked against her. Yet despite everything, she'd plowed ahead – never allowing anything to slow her down or sway her from her path.

~ "If I got the power to change things for the better, why should I sit back and do nothing? 'Cuz it's Fate?" ~

~ "I don't give up... and I don't run away... 'Cuz that's my nindo!" ~

"To be that determined..." Neji sat up, gazing out the window behind him. Two birds sat chirping on the windowsill. At his movement one of them startled and flew off. In the past he'd always
likened himself to a caged bird; unable to fly away. Naruto had suggested that the two of them were similar, but she acted as if her cage didn't exist at all. Was it really so easy?

The second bird chirped, cocking its head at him before fluttering away to follow after the first.

Watching it soaring off into the distance, Neji leaned back against the window pane, closing his eyes. His injuries protested the movement, but he ignored them. "It would seem…" Alone in the room, no one was present to see his lips turn upwards in a small, genuine smile. "That you're not a failure at all… Naru…"

oooo

Kiba watched with worried eyes as the older ninja before him drew green healing chakra to his hands, slowly lowering them towards his unconscious teammate. A white ANBU mask-covered face, almost a stark contrast against the dark corner they huddled in, concentrated on the unconscious heiress laying on the ground in front of them. Normally Kiba would have questioned what an ANBU was doing alone – and visible – at a crowded event like this, but desperate times called for desperate measures, he supposed.

"She's…" He paused, swallowing. "She's gonna be okay, won't she?"

The ANBU was silent a few moments, looking up only when the green chakra receded from his hands. "She'll be fine," he said. "I imagine this was just a bit too much excitement for her… she's suffered an injury recently, correct?"

Kiba growled under his breath, causing the ANBU to cock his head in curiosity. "She shouldn't have come…" he murmured aloud. Akamaru gave him an inquiring whimper. "She wanted to cheer on Narut—I mean, Naru…" He paused, sighing resignedly. "I guess I did, too… but I never thought the fight would turn out this way." Secure in the knowledge that Hinata would be all right, he turned to his ninken, smirking lightly. "That sure was somethin', right, Akamaru?"

The white puppy barked in agreement.

ANBU chuckled, rising to his feet to gaze out into the arena. 'And this is only just the beginning…'

oooo

Miles away from the stadium, deep in the Konoha forest, a small group of ninja displaying the hitai-ate of Otoigakure positioned themselves in the trees, waiting. Below them in the clearing, several Suna ninja gathered themselves in a circle, planting sealing scrolls into the ground. Once they were finished, they waited for their signal...

It was only a matter of time.

oooo

"SHI-KA-MA-RUUUU!"

Shikamaru yelped as a fist bopped him over the back of the head. Turning a glare to its owner, he growled in annoyance, "Damn it, Naru! What the hell was that for?"
The blonde ignored him, her face red in incredulous anger. "Just whaddya think you were doing giving up like that?!

Why was it he was the only one not upset about the outcome of his fight; it wasn't as if it were a big deal, right? The shadow user sighed, shrugging his shoulders in indifference. "It would have been too troublesome to keep fighting when I was about to run out of chakra..." he explained. "Besides, what's the point of—?"

"The point is you're in the Chunin Exams!" Naruto yelled. Part of her still couldn't wrap her mind around the fact. She'd always known Shikamaru to be lacking in motivation, but for him to forfeit the match when his victory was all but assured? It was ridiculous! "Why'd you even bother coming if you don't care about being promoted?"

The normally laidback boy paused, grimacing slightly. "Because..."

In the stands, Ino let out a loud sneeze.

Beside her, Sakura cast her a curious look. "What's the matter, Ino-pig?" she asked. "Comin' down with a cold?"

"Ha! You wish, Forehead Girl!" Ino shot back. "But never mind that - where is Sasuke-kun?" Leaning forward in her seat, the blonde set about scanning the stands for any signs of the missing chuunin-exam participant. "His fight is supposed to be next, isn't it?"

"I don't see him..." Sakura frowned in worry. 'Is it possible that he isn't here yet...? They'd already pushed back his fight once... would they do so again? What if they disqualify him...? ' She clenched her hands together. 'Sasuke-kun...'

Though the audience members had been charged by the excitement of Shikamaru's fight against Temari, a great majority of them had come to see one person and one person only.

Uchiha Sasuke.

"I don't get it!" Naruto pulled at her hair in frustration. "Where is that jackass? He should be here by now!"

Up in the participants' booth, Temari and Kankuro watched Gaara with anxious eyes, as if both trying to figure out what their brother had done with the body...

From his position in the stands, Baki focused on his youngest charge, beads of sweat rolling down his face. Had Gaara really killed the Uchiha? 'He couldn't have... not with the plan so close to being set into motion... he knows better!' He frowned, his gaze going towards the stadium entrance. 'This kid better show up quick... or else we're all screwed...'

Amidst the yelling and screaming for the boy to show himself, Jounin Namiashi Raido leaned down beside the Hokage's seat, his scarred face drawn tight in worry. The yelling from the stands was starting to reach a fever pitch; it was only a matter of time before the crowd got violent. "Hokage-sama," he murmured. "We can't wait for the Uchiha any longer. We've already
given him enough time – he has to be disqualified."

It was true that they'd already made a great many allowances for the boy - most at the Council's insistence - even so far as to put his own teammates at a disadvantage. The Hokage frowned. "I suppose you're right..." he murmured. "Notify Genma at once..." 'I only hope this doesn't cause a riot...'

Raido moved to teleport down to the stadium floor, halted by the Kazekage's raised hand. "Please wait a little while longer, Hokage-sama," the Sunagakure village head entreated. "I'm sure you realize many people here, including nobles from many of the other Shinobi Nations, have come here specifically to witness the last Uchiha in action. I must admit I, too, am interested in seeing how the boy will fare against our Gaara..."

"That may be so, Kazekage-sama," the Hokage replied. "But the boy has been given ample time to present himself."

"This is true," the other man agreed. "But perhaps for the sake of the peace, we could wait a little while longer? Who knows how the crowd would react upon learning of Uchiha-san's disqualification? It could get ugly."

"I see..." Sarutobi closed his eyes. "You make a valid point, Kazekage-sama..."

"Sir...?" Raido ventured.

"We shall wait a little while longer." He replied. "Please inform Genma."

"Yes, Hokage-sama." With a low bow, the jounin vanished in a poof of smoke

Outside the stadium, two chuunin guards glanced upwards at the two approaching figures. At their familiar faces, the two of them grinned wildly.

"Hey, you're here!

"Glad you guys could make it!"

"Yosh!" Teeth glistening in the sunlight, Maito Gai nodded a greeting to the two guards before turning to his injured student with a wide grin. "Now my vibrantly youthful student, are you prepared to witness your compatriots displaying their Blazing Fires of Glorious Youth?"

Lee gazed up at his sensei, saluting smartly. "Yes, sir, Gai-sensei!"

The first guard laughed nervously. "Well... you've got plenty of time... only two fights have taken place so far."

"Only?! Are you kidding me?" the other guard exclaimed. "Man, that was the most amazing thing I think I've ever seen!"

Gai and Lee blinked in confusion.

"Are you talking about that Nara kid versus the Suna girl?" the first guard asked.
"Nah, that was great, but I mean the first fight… with the Hyuuga."

"Hyuuga Neji?" Lee leaned forward on his crutches, his expression eager. "What happened? Who did he fight?"

"It was that blonde kid, Uzumaki Naru!" the second guard answered.

The boy blinked in confusion. "Naru…? Are you sure you do not mean Naru-to?"

Gai chuckled thoughtfully. "So it's as I suspected all along…” He recalled his encounter with the blonde at the hospital. "It appears Uzumaki Naru is really a Blossoming Flower in disguise!" He grinned widely, his teeth pinging for effect.

Lee stared at his teacher with eyes wide in disbelief. "Naruto… is a girl…?" Before his mind could even process the information, he gasped once more. "Wait - Naru fought Neji… is she all right? Who won…?"

Gai turned his attention from his student - his reaction to the news had was intriguing - as he too was curious as to how the blonde had fared. He remembered the vow she'd made when Lee was first injured, and then again when she'd first come to visit him in the hospital.

~ "I remember, Lee… I remember… and I'm not gonna lose!" ~

~ "Don't you worry, Lee! I'm gonna show that Prodigy what a Genius of Hardwork can do!" ~

The first guard laughed. "You wouldn't believe it," he said with a grin. "But Uzumaki won the fight!"

The two taijutsu masters gaped in surprise.

"I never knew anybody could come back after takin' a beating like she did," he continued. "But she managed to turn the fight around… that kid's got guts, I'll tell you that…"

"Naruto… beat Neji…" Lee's eyes were still wide in shock.

~ "I'll make you eat those words, got that? It's a promise!" ~

'He… She beat him… and I have never come close…' He closed his eyes, clenching his uninjured hand into a fist. His face was troubled a few moments before he remembered his own words to her.

~ "…Should you manage to beat him… That would be fine as well…" ~

'She kept to her word… she beat Neji… because I could not…' He remembered blue eyes grinning at him as she left the arena field, hearing her voice above all the others cheering for him during his own fight. "Uzumaki Naru… you really are amazing…"

Beside him, Gai smiled knowingly.

oooo
Naruto glanced over at Genma as he checked the stop watch once more, a worried frown on her face. "How much time is left, Proctor-san?" she asked.

He grimaced at her slightly. "You do remember my name is Genma, don't you?" he asked her in mild annoyance. Not that he had anything against her being polite, but he didn't really like the idea of being called 'Proctor-san' as if it were his name. He was a freakin' jounin for Kami's sake - this wasn't his only job!

"Hai, hai, Proctor-san," The Jounin's eyebrow twitched slightly. "How much time?"

Grudgingly, the older ninja glanced at his watch once more, before looking back up at the two genin in front of him. "Your friend has about 30 seconds to show himself before he's automatically disqualified."

Shikamaru's eyes widened.

"What?!" The blonde growled in annoyance. "He better show up! I'll kick his ass if he doesn't - his and Kakashi-sensei's!"

"Is that a fact?"

The two genin jumped at the new voice, their eyes widening once more at the sudden appearance of two figures in a swirl of leaves.

Ino gasped.

Sakura leaned forward. "It's…"

Blue eyes blinked. "Sasuke…?"

Her male teammate stood beside their sensei, his appearance decidedly changed from when she had last seen him. His outfit was different - he wore a black body suit complete with the wide open collar and Uchiha mon emblazoned on the back. His arm guards had been replaced by bandages ('Freakin' copycat!' she thought to herself) held in place by thick, dark leather bands. Sasuke's hair had grown as well; his long shaggy bangs now hung down past his collar, making him look even more dark and angst-filled than he had before.

But he was here, and that was all that really mattered.

Stepping forward, the blonde gave him a once over with a grimace. Meeting his eyes, she smirked. "You look ever jerkier than before…" she remarked.

Behind her, Shikamaru groaned. "That doesn't even make sense."

It took a few moments for Sasuke to respond, as he too had been studying her appearance. She looked different to him as well, considering the fact this was the first time he had seen her without her jacket on - excluding the time when her secret had been revealed to them.

Though much about her appearance hadn't changed all that much, the black vest she currently wore really made her look different. Much different.

'She… actually looks like a girl now…' Sasuke awed. Despite his shock, he was able to keep his
face schooled in its usual disinterested expression. At the blonde's comment, he gave the typical
snort. "Hn, still a moron."

Studying their interaction, Kakashi chuckled lightly. "So, Naruto," The blonde tore her gaze from
the Uchiha, focusing her blue eyes on him. "How was your fight?"

She scowled, folding her arms across her chest. "You'd know if you'd been here on time," she
muttered. "As it is, Sasuke nearly got disqualified!"

Sasuke blinked in surprise.

The gray haired jounin blinked, turning to Genma for clarification. "Really?"

"They pushed back your fight time *and* gave you an extension…” the other jounin
answered. "Had you been 10 seconds later…"

"Well then," Kakashi closed his eye in a grin. "We got lucky!"

Sasuke rolled his eyes.

Turning his attention back to the audience - who was cheering even more loudly than before now
that the person they were here to see had finally arrived - Genma exclaimed loudly, "The third
match of the Finals, featuring Uchiha Sasuke of Konohagakure versus Sabaku no Gaara of
Sunagakure will soon commence. All non-participants please clear the field!"

Kakashi nodded, vanishing in a poof of smoke.

"Guess that's us," Shikamaru replied, turning to the blonde. "C'mon, Naru…" He paused,
remembering how she had pushed him down to the arena floor when his name had been
called. "And we're takin' the stairs this time!"

Apparently the shadow user was still a bit touchy about it. Naruto grinned at him
apologetically. "Hai, hai, Shikamaru…"

"Oi, Naruto."

The blonde paused and glanced back at her teammate only to be met in the face with her orange
jacket. "Hey, what the hell, Teme?!"

"Put your jacket back on," he muttered. The blonde blinked and Sasuke glanced away. "I don't
wanna hear you complaining about it when it gets trashed during my fight."

She opened her mouth to object at his cockiness, but thought better of it. Shrugging her jacket back
on but leaving it open, she glanced back up at him with a serious expression. "I beat Neji." she
said.

If he was surprised, his expression didn't show it. "You better win your fight," she
continued. "Don't forget, you an' I got to face each other, too."

A smirk finally making its way across his face, Sasuke nodded. "Right. I'm gonna win - you can
count on that."
Giving him a nod, Naruto turned and jogged off after Shikamaru. After watching her vanish into the stairwell, Sasuke glanced upwards into the participants' booth, meeting the empty gaze of his opponent. Gaara stared back at him impassively before heading to the stairs leading down to the arena.

'So you're gonna make me wait now?' Sasuke smirked to himself. 'Well, it doesn't matter... I'm ready for you.'

oooo

"Aaaiiiiieee! Sasuke-kun is finally here! And he made it on time!"

Sakura nodded in agreement, though her enthusiasm was far more subdued compared to Ino's exuberance. "Thank goodness..." Despite her relief at Sasuke finally showing himself before nearly being disqualified - ( *THAT WAS A CLOSE ONE! SHAAA!!!* ) - she couldn't help but think back to his behavior before the intermission. The way he'd look at her, and at Naruto...

'But he wasn't looking at her like that just now...' It was hard to determine the look that had passed across the self-proclaimed Avenger's face at the sight of the blonde, but Sakura was certain it was one he'd never directed towards her before. Watching the two of them, for the briefest of moments, Sakura had felt as though she were being left behind all over again...

"Ah, Sakura, you're looking well."

The pink-haired kunzite glanced up, her green eyes falling on her student standing behind them. "Kakashi-sensei!" Her eyes lit up in greeting before darkening when she scowled at him angrily. "Could you have cut it any closer?!

"Maa, maa..." The Jounin closed his eye in a grin, rubbing the back of his head abashedly. "Everything worked out just fine..."

*FINE HE SAYS?! KAKASHI-SENSEI IS A JERK!!*

"You love to live dangerously, don't you, Kakashi?" said Gai as he and Lee came down the steps towards them.

"Gai," Kakashi greeted with a slight nod.

"And Lee!" Ino exclaimed.

"You're all right!" Sakura's eyes lit up in relief.

Between bites of chips, Chouji waved jovially.

The injured genin smiled at them in greeting, then began scanning the stands until his eyes fell on the participants' booth. He frowned slightly when only Shino, Temari, and Kankuro were visible. "I do not see Naruto..."

"She an' Shika re on their way back up now..." Chouji explained.

"Is it true?" Lee questioned. "Did Naruto really beat Neji?"
The Akimichi boy nodded. "I still can't believe it, but yeah…"

"She really trounced him…!" Ino exclaimed, still in awe. "I didn't think she'd get up after that Kaiten."

'Neji managed to perfect the Main Branch's Kaiten… and yet she still managed to withstand it…?!

"I told you Naru was strong!" Sakura replied. "If she says she's gonna do something, then she's gonna do it!"

Lee listened to their words with half an ear, his mind trying to conjure up an image of a feminine Naruto. After a few failed efforts, an image of a bright blue eyes popped up in his mind's eye.

~ "It may take a while, but you can do it! Rock Lee will be a ninja again… believe it!" ~

~ "I'm Uzumaki Naruto, the future Hokage - believe it!" ~

He let out a sharp gasp, drawing the younger genin's attention back to him. "Could she be the one that came to see me…?"

"Huh?" said Ino and Chouji in unison.

"You mean you didn't realize?" Gai asked him. "Surely there is no one else in Konohagakure with such a Shining Spirit! She even left you that wonderfully youthful symbol of Determination!"

Ino blinked in surprise, remembering the small potted plant with a red blossom sitting upon Lee's nightstand when they had gone to see him. 'This guy knows about flowers?' she wondered.

Sakura's thoughts ran along a different track. 'So it was Naru who left that plant…?'

"Really?" A cheery grin slowly spread across Lee's face as he pumped his fist in excitement. "Then I must surely recover! So that she and I might someday face each other in combat!"

"Yes, Lee! We must be grateful to Naru-san for returning your youthful vigor!"

"Youthful vigor?" chorused the three rookie genin, grimacing slightly.

Lee looked upwards at his sensei, his eyes glistening. "Gai-sensei…!"

"Lee…!"

"Gai-sensei!" The two bowl-cut bearing ninja sobbed and embraced each other fiercely, the people in the stands behind them vanishing under a backdrop of waves and rocks.

Kakash regarded the pair with a bland expression.

After a few awkward moments, the pair broke apart leaving Gai free to strike another ridiculous pose. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "How fitting it is that our two most underestimated students should find inspiration in each other!" He turned to his fellow jounin, his teeth pinging brightly. "They would make quite a pair, eh, Kakashi?"
Glancing up from the pages of his Icha Icha Paradise - that he had pulled out in the middle of Gai’s impromptu rant - Kakashi's stared at him blankly. "Sorry… did you say something, Gai?"

The other man's jaw dropped and he whirled around with his hands in his hair, wailing in frustration. "Again with that hip attitude, Kakashi!" Despite the bewildered looks of those around them, he recovered quickly, facing the droopy eyed ninja with a smirk. "Just what I'd expect from my Eternal Rival!"

Sakura and Ino blinked in unison, the same thought running through their minds. 'What a FREAK…!'  

Chouji merely continued eating his chips.

Normally Lee would have made some comment in defense of his teacher, but his thoughts were still focused on the blonde. 'You've already defeated my rival...' He remembered her smiling face as she took on the 'Good Guy' pose back during the Preliminaries, before his gaze fell on the lone genin standing in the center of the arena. 'But… I wonder how yours will fare… Naru-san…'
Chapter 16b: Panic and Fear

Naruto paused in her hurried trek up the stairs leading back to their booth, pausing to look back at the pineapple-haired boy trudging along behind her at a more sedate pace. “Come on, hurry up, Lazy Bones!” she exclaimed. “We’re gonna miss the fight!”

Shikamaru regarded her with a grimace. “You’re starting to sound like Ino…” he grumbled. “I take it you want Uchiha to win?”

She blinked at him. “Of course.”

Surprisingly, Shikamaru found he felt a bit of disappointment. However, the feeling went away when Naruto spoke again. “If anybody’s gonna wipe that stupid smirk off the teme’s face, it’s gonna be me!”

He smirked, relieved to know his friend hadn’t turned into another one of those rabid fan girls. ‘Not like it matters of course…’ “I s’pose we oughta be callin’ you Uzumaki Naru, Prodigy Slayer then.”

The blonde let out a loud laugh, pausing when she realized they were not alone on the stairwell. Shikamaru frowned at her abrupt silence, following her gaze to the level above them where a pair of sandals stood in a pool of sand.

‘This guy again… what’s he doing…?’ He ventured up a few stairs to stand level with the blonde. Here he had a clearer view of Gaara staring down two chūnin from Kumogakure. They stared at back him, their faces frozen in fear as sand slowly crept up their bodies, threatening to smother them completely.

The two Konoha genin’s eyes widened as the redhead slowly raised his arm, fingers clenched.

‘No… he wouldn’t…!’

“Sand Coffin!”

Naruto let out a sharp gasp, one that was quickly smothered by Shikamaru’s hand as he yanked her back down out of sight. Pressing them both against the inner wall, he tried to reign in his emotions - his mind still trying to process the fact that they had just witnessed a murder. ‘Shit…’ he thought to himself, the image replaying itself over and over in his mind. ‘He just killed those guys… without even breaking a sweat…?’

Remembering their last encounter, the boy’s words echoed in his mind.

~ “…I love only myself… I kill to prove my own existence…” ~

The screams from above them had finally stopped, leaving only the sound of Gaara’s footsteps as he turned away to descend the stairs.

‘Crap…’ Shikamaru glanced around frantically for a place to hide. ‘There’s no place to go but up or down…’ He glanced over at Naruto, vaguely alarmed at how hard the blonde was
trembling. Her eyes were pale and wide, staring at nothing. ‘We’re definitely screwed…’

The footsteps grew louder and the two genin looked up just as Gaara walked past them. He didn’t say a word.

Shikamaru felt Naruto shift, reaching for his hand to pull it away from her mouth. “Why…?” she whispered hoarsely, her body still trembling.

Gaara stopped several stairs down, but did not look back at them. Several moments passed in silence before he finally spoke. “They were in my way,” he answered simply.

Naruto froze.

“If you get in my way again,” he continued quietly. “I will kill you.” That said, he continued down the stairs once more as if nothing were amiss.

Once he was out of sight, Shikamaru dropped down to the floor, leaning his head back and letting out a heaving sigh of relief. If he had known the exams were gonna be like this… “That guy’s totally bonkers…” He glanced over at the blonde, who was still standing. “You all right?”

“He’s… he’s not right in the head…” she murmured. “This fight… it’s gonna be just like before…” She turned back to Shikamaru, her eyes wide in panic. “He’s gonna try to kill Sasuke!”

Shikamaru’s eyes widened in shock. Granted, he didn’t like the guy but he certainly didn’t want to watch him get murdered by a psychopath!

Naruto reached out for his arm, pulling him up by his arm. “C’mon! We gotta tell Kakashi-sensei! He’s got to stop this fight!” She turned and dashed up the stairs, two at a time. In mood to argue with her, Shikamaru followed after her.

ooo

“Kakashi-sensei!”

The jounin looked up at the sight of his student and Shikamaru, both of their faces sweaty and ashen as if they’d just seen a ghost. “Something wrong, Naruto?”

“We gotta stop the fight, Sensei!” she exclaimed. “We can’t let Sasuke fight Gaara!”

“Naru-kun…?” Sakura blinked in confusion. She’d never seen such a look of desperation on her teammate’s face before. And for Sasuke…? ‘What’s going on here?’

Lee blinked at the blonde’s sudden arrival, trying to reconcile her with the image of the blonde that had visited him in the hospital. Were they really the same person? He puzzled this, his thick eyebrows furrowing in confusion. ‘Then how is it I didn’t recognize her…?’

~ “I see... are you a ninja...?” ~

~ “Uh, no... but I know a few...?” ~

Why had she lied? Had she been embarrassed? Why had she pretended to be a boy in the first place? Seeing the blonde in front of him brought to mind so many questions begging to
answered. Granted, he’d been intrigued by the blonde ever since their first encounter - in which she blocked what should have been an impossible kick without batting an eye. In the Forest of Death, she’d put herself at risk, moving quicker than any other genin he’d ever encountered to help him evade a Sound attack. And her fight against Kiba? She’d displayed such strength and will power that he had been absolutely certain that the two of them were kindred spirits. Even while fighting against Gaara, he could not wait until the two of them had a chance to face each other.

But now… Lee paused, gazing down at the crutches in his grip. He’d been told that his career as a ninja was over. No matter how her encouraging words had helped him, Lee knew it would be some time before he saw any battles again. He would be left behind while she and the others continued to improve…

‘Like Sasuke...’ Before the blonde’s arrival, Lee had listened with a strained smile to Ino and Sakura gushing over the Uchiha’s strength and skill. And once Naruto had finally arrived, whose name - aside from her teacher’s - was the first out of her mouth?

Uchiha Sasuke.

‘Naru-san... are you unreachable as well...?’

oooo

“…He wasted those two guys like they were nothing!” Naruto exclaimed, eyes focused on that of her teacher. “That guy’s not normal! He-he’s just like--” She paused, remembering the empty look in his eyes. ‘…Like me…’

At her sudden silence, Shikamaru cast her a worried glance.

If Kakashi had any indication of what she was going to say, his expression didn’t show it. “Don’t worry,” he said lightly. “Sasuke has trained hard this past month.”

“But not enough for this guy!” she cried out. “Sensei -- you don’t understand--”

The jounin turned to her, his expression hard. “Just watch.” he said sternly. The blonde closed her mouth with an audible snap, her eyes angry and hurt.

Gai regarded the two of them silently. He was well aware of the pressure the Council had put upon Kakashi to ensure that Sasuke was properly prepared for this exam. Many nobles and dignitaries from Kaze, Tsuchi, Mizu, and Rai no Kuni had come to witness what these exams simply because of Sasuke. Konoha had always been known the largest variety of Kekkei Genkai, and the Uchiha and their Sharingan had been one of the most notable. Given that Sasuke was the last of their clan within the village walls, he had no choice but to make a strong showing, otherwise the village would be seen as weak.

The Council could not have that.

‘It isn’t right...’ the taijutsu master thought with a frown. ‘A sensei is given three students... three students that must learn to work together as a unit, to be able to depend on each other in dangerous situations... To force a teacher to favor one and forsake the others... it breeds hostility and dissension in the ranks...’ He gazed at the tight expression on the blonde’s face, and the worried expression on her fellow female teammate. ‘After all this is done... will they still be able
to function as a team…?

The same question ran through Kakashi’s mind, though he too had no answer.

Genma studied the expressions of the two genin facing each other in front of him. One cocky and smug, the other completely indifferent. Both boys had displayed amazing strength in their previous battles, like many others, the jounin found himself wondering who would come out victorious.

‘Well… there’s only one way to find out…’ Adjusting his senbon in his mouth, he raised his arm and brought it down swiftly, jumping back as he did so. “Begin!”

Neither boy moved.

Sasuke studied the redhead, trying to determine just what he was dealing with.

“You’re strong,” Gaara’s expression remained void of emotion as he spoke. “I can tell just by looking at you.”

“Same here,” Sasuke said with a smirk.

“Though I wonder…” Gaara closed his eyes briefly. “How strong she is…?”

Though he mentioned no name, Sasuke knew exactly who he was talking about. He scowled darkly. “She’s not your opponent, I am.”

Unfazed by his tone, light green eyes opened once more. “But she will be… after I kill you.”

“We’ll see about that!” Sasuke vanished from his position in a blur, running around Gaara in a wide circle.

“He’s so fast!” Sakura awed. “Way faster than before!”

Ino squealed in excitement. “Woo hoo! Way to go, Sasuke-kun!”

Drawing several kunai from his weapons pouch, Sasuke hurled them at his opponent with all his might, scowling lightly when they were blocked by a wall of sand. “Hn.” He raised his hands, rapidly running through a series of seals before raising his fingers to his mouth. “Katon: GOUKAKYU NO JUTSU!”

Gaara regarded the flames rushing towards him with the same indifferent expression, not even batting an eye as the sand rushed up again in his defense.

Despite the failure of his attack, a smirk rose up on the dark-haired genin’s face. ‘Got him,’ Body tensing, he rushed towards Gaara, only to disappear and reappear behind him with his fist pulled back to strike.

Recognizing the familiar movement, Lee’s eyes widened in surprise. “That’s…”

Naru’s eyes narrowed in confusion. ‘Lee did that same move during the Preliminaries…’ She
gazed down at the Uchiha, noting that his Sharingan were activated. She knew the doujutsu allowed her to predict and copy movements, but… ‘Sasuke wasn’t…’ She trailed off, glancing up at her sensei once more. Her eyes fell on the hitai-ate that covered his own Sharingan. ‘He didn’t…’

Down below, Gaara stared impassively as his sand lashed out at the attacking Leaf genin. Sasuke maneuvered easily out of the way of each blow, vaulting backwards a few paces to hurl a shower of kunai down upon him. The exploding tags on the end of each blade fizzled and activated, covering the arena in a thick cloud of smoke with the resulting explosion.

The stadium erupted in a roaring cheer.

“He got him!” Ino squealed.

“No, not yet.” Gai replied.

The group stared down at the arena as the smoke cleared, revealing Gaara to be once again concealed within a large protective dome of sand.

Sasuke bit back a curse, jumping back as sandy spikes emerged from the dome, intent on spearing him to death. He ran to and up the wall, using chakra to stick to the surface as he threw a few more exploding tag kunai for good measure. Knowing it had yielded no results, he gazed down at his opponent with a smirk. “So, that’s how that’s how it’s gonna be, huh?” He stared down at his hand. “Maybe now’s the time to give It a go.” He raised his hands once more, running through a new series of hand signs before beginning to draw chakra to his hands.

Gai’s eyes widened. “You taught him that technique!”

Kakashi glanced over at him. “I also have confidence in my student.”

Sakura glanced up at them in confusion. “What technique is it?

“Kakashi is a master of over 1,000 techniques,” Gai explained, his expression solemn. “But only one of them is of his own creation… A combination of speed and precise control allows the user to manifest chakra visibly in their hands. With this attack one can cut through almost anything.” He gave Kakashi a look. “They say he once used it to cut through bolt of lightning - hence the nickname Raikiri, the Lightning Cutter…”

Ino gave to two older ninja a disbelieving stare. ‘Cut through bolt of lightning…? Yeah right…!’

Naruto remained silent, her gaze alternating between Kakashi and Sasuke. The Uchiha’s chakra was now visible, taking on the appearance of lightning crackling in his upturned hand. The air was suddenly filled with the sound of chirping birds.

“That sound…” Her eyes widened, remembering a similar sound back in Nami no Kuni. Haku had heard it as well, right before rushing off to protect Zabuza. ‘Haku…’

Rushing down the wall, Sasuke rushed towards Gaara’s sand dome at top speed, ripping up dirt and rock as his attack speared the ground. Once he was in range, he raised his arm to go in for the kill, red eyes flashing. “CHIDORI!!!”

The crowd let out a collective gasp of surprise as the sand gave way to the attack, another loud
explosion occurring as a result.

“That’s impossible!” Kankuro gaped.

As the dust settled, Sasuke was once again revealed just outside of the dome of sand, inches away from Gaara’s spikes. His hand, however, had broken through.

“He broke through!” Sakura exclaimed.

“But did he do any damage?” Shikamaru wondered.

Inside the dome, Gaara stared at the arm grasping his shoulder. ‘Impossible…’ he thought to himself. ‘No one has ever…’ He trailed off, his eyes widening at the sight of red fluid slowly trickling down his arm. ‘It’s blood… MY blood…’ He reared back, shrieking in horror.

Above them, Temari let out a sharp gasp, gripping the railing tightly. “Gaara…” she breathed. “He’s hurt…”

“NO!! NOOOOO!!! I’LL KILL YOOOUUU!!!” Sasuke jumped back as the sand forming the dome fell away before rising up again to form a new shell.

Kankuro gulped uneasily. “You don’t think he’s gonna use that jutsu do you?”

His sister shook her head. “I don’t know…” she murmured. “Nothing like this has ever happened before.”

The puppeteer let out a groan. “Mannn… this is all wrong! This wasn’t a part of the plan at all!”

Back in the corner, Shino raised an eyebrow in curiosity. ‘Plan…?’

oooo

Watching the Sand ninja through Sharingan eyes, Sasuke couldn’t for the life of him figure out what was going on. The other boy had retreated once again behind a reinforced dome of sand, but he’d left a wide opening right in front. It was almost as if he wanted him to attack.

Sasuke frowned thoughtfully. ‘Just what the hell is he up to…?’ He reached down for his weapons pouch, preparing to hurl another kunai with an exploding tag.

Then, without warning from out of the opening of Gaara’s dome emerged something that the Uchiha could only assume was an arm. Scaly and made of sand, it lashed out quickly with clawed fingers before slowly retracting itself back into the recesses of the shield.

In the stands, Ino screamed.

Gai’s eyes were wide in horror.

‘What the hell was that?’ Kakashi wondered, his visible eye wide in shock.

Hidden in the stands, Baki bit back a curse. ‘Gaara, you fool…! You’re going to wreck everything!’
“You…” Sasuke looked up at the sound of the raspy voice coming from within the darkness of the sand dome. It was the first time he’d heard the boy speak since their very first encounter. “You think you’re stronger than me…?”

He scowled, “What of it?”

Gaara chuckled. “Those eyes of yours… they know hatred and anger… they fuel that strength of yours, don’t they? Show me all of your hatred, all of your anger…!” His eyes widened, his expression turning manic. “Let me kill you so that I can feel alive!”

Sasuke tensed, feeling a chill of apprehension. ‘What is this kid…?’

“He’s not normal…” Naruto muttered, unknowingly answering the Uchiha’s unspoken question.

The audience murmured in confusion.

Leaning forward in his seat, Sarutobi studied the arena his expression drawn tight in confusion and worry. He’d never seen anything like the attack the redhead had used… and his little monologue…? The boy was obviously mentally unstable!

Beside him, the Kazekage remained silent.

Eyes on the arena, Kiba bit his lip in apprehension, his body trembling lightly. “I knew there was something off about that guy…” he murmured, remembering how he had slaughtered that team from Amegakure in the Forest of Death without showing a single sign of remorse - or any other emotion at all! He glanced down at Akamaru, who was looking up at him worriedly. “We should get Hinata out of here…” he said, reaching down for her. “I have a feeling things are about to get ugly…”

“Actually, you’re right.” Kiba blinked as the ANBU knelt down in front of him, head cocked to the side like a bird. “But it’s probably better if you stay.”

“Wha…?” Before the dog ninja could ask what was happening, the other ninja had run through a series of hand signs, placing a hand over his head. The boy’s head bobbed up and down a few moments before he dropped to the ground unconscious. Akamaru followed soon after.

Across the stadium, people began to drop to sleep as a shower of shimmering feathers drifted down from the sky. Only the seasoned ninja positioned in various sections in the stands recognized the display for what it was…

“Kakashi…” Gai warned.

“I know,” he answered, positioning himself so that the two of them were standing back to back.

Bewildered at the sight of so many people unconscious, Sakura also drew her hands into a simple
“Genjutsu.” Hearing several thuds, Kakashi looked up to see Naruto and Shikamaru unconscious on the ground. Ino, Chouji, and Lee were all slumped over in their seats as well. Simultaneously, he and Gai raised their hands into same sign as Sakura, calling out ‘Kai!’ to dispel the jutsu. “But why…?”

Rising out of his seat, the Hokage surveyed the stadium with outrage. “What is the meaning of this?”

“You mean you haven’t figured it out yet?” the Kazekage asked. At his signal, his two attending guards moved from their positions at his side, rushing towards the older ninja.

Quick to act, Raido stepped forward, only to be hurled back by the force of the kunai that collided with his body. He hit the back wall with a thud and a groan, losing consciousness.

“Kazekage!” Sarutobi yelled, alarmed.

The other kage merely chuckled. “You are being invaded.”

Though his eyes were on the young Academy students currently running laps around the school courtyard, Umino Iruka couldn’t keep his mind from the arena… wondering what had become from his favorite blonde student.

‘It’s been some time already…’ he thought to himself. ‘Her fight must have finished by now…’ He trailed off, frowning in worry. ‘I hope she managed oka-- Ah no!’ He shook his head to shake the thought away. ‘What am I saying! I’m not supposed to show any favoritism! I have to treat all my students equally or else I’d be just as bad as Kakashi!’ He glanced down, visualizing sunny blonde hair and bright, smiling blue eyes.

“Iruka followed the Hokage’s outstretched hand, his gaze falling upon a blonde in the middle of the empty courtyard. The child had their back to them, totally focused on whatever she was drawing with the small piece of chalk in her tiny hand.

Studying the child more closely, the Academy teacher caught sight of the three whisker marks adorning one cherubic cheek. “But that’s--!”

“Uzumaki Naruto,” the Hokage supplied. “Your newest student.”

“Hokage-sama,” the normally jovial teacher shook with restrained emotion. “You can’t expect me to teach that--”

“Him.” the Hokage corrected firmly. “Naruto needs a teacher - and I cannot think of anyone far better suited for the job than you, Iruka.”
“But why…?” he asked, staring at the child as if she were the devil himself. “Why me…?”

“Because he has no one else.”

Iruka paused, staring at the old ninja, and the pained expression on his face. The Hokage... was actually feeling sympathy for that, that thing...?

As if sensing his scrutiny, the blonde paused in her doodling, turning and looking up at them with the brightest, bluest eyes Iruka had ever seen. Could a demon have eyes like that...?

‘The Fox’s eyes had been red, not blue...’

Those eyes fell on the Hokage, lighting up in joy as the blonde rose to his feet. “Hokage-jiji!” The blonde dusted the chalk from her knees, before running over towards them. Iruka went for his kunai pouch but stopped when the blonde only grasped the old ninja's leg in a greeting hug.

“How are you feeling today, Naruto?” the Hokage asked. “Well?” The blonde head bobbed up and down. Iruka started to smile, but caught himself last minute. “Good to hear. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

Realizing that they were not alone, the little blonde froze, staring at Iruka with fearful eyes before seeking refuge in the Hokage’s robes.

“Now, now, no need to be frightened, Naruto,” the Hokage chided gently. “This is Umino Iruka. He’s going to be your new teacher.”

“He’s not gonna hit me, is he...?”

Iruka blinked. ‘Hit him...?’

“No, Iruka would never do such a thing,” the Hokage replied. “He’s a very good person. And a very good teacher. Don’t you want to say hello?”

Reluctantly, the blonde nodded, stepping out of her hiding spot. Facing forward, she leaned forward to give Iruka a formal bow... well one as formal as a 5 year old could manage. “H’lo...” she murmured.

Iruka remained silent.

“You see, Naruto?” the Hokage smiled at the blonde. “Iruka is so excited to meet you that he’s speechless!”

“Is he really?” the blonde asked. The Hokage nodded. A hopeful grin spread across the blonde’s face as she took another step forward, bowing her head once again. “Hi, Iruka-sensei!” she chirped. “My name’s Naruto! I promise you I’m gonna be your bestest student ’cuz someday I’m gonna be the great Hokage ever! I even told Hokage-jiji so!”

The Hokage grinned. “He certainly did.”

Staring at the blonde, speechless, Iruka came to the sudden realization that there was no possible way this child could be the demon that murdered his parents. The Kyuubi wouldn’t be able to
emote such open honesty and sincerity. Only a child could do that.

He walked forward, kneeling down in front of the blonde. He raised his hand, pausing when she flinched, bracing herself. Feeling a twinge of guilt, Iruka waited a few seconds before resting his hand gently on the blonde’s head. Those same blue eyes opened and stared up at him in bewilderment, before shining in relief.

‘This child’s been hurt…’ he thought to himself, glancing up once at the Hokage only to see that same pained expression on his face once more. ‘People hate him, and fear him… he doesn’t have anyone to look after him. He’s an orphan…’ If the teacher had looked at himself in the mirror, he would have found his expression mirroring the Hokage’s. ‘Like me…’

“Ne, Iruka-sensei…?”

“Hm?”

“You really are gonna teach me how to be a ninja, right?”

Iruka paused, staring down at the little blonde. From that moment on, he knew that it would no longer be within his power to hate her. This child was now one of his students; his responsibility.

“Yes, I am, Naruto,” he said softly. “And if you work hard, I’m sure you’re going to be a great ninja.”

The blonde bobbed her head up and down, grinning widely. “Hai!”

oo End Flashback oo

In the early days of her education, Naruto had reminded Iruka so much of himself as a youth. She was loud and rambunctious, as well as notorious for pulling pranks. Though her actions suggested she wanted nothing more than a few laughs from the crowd, deep down she yearned the attention of her peers, doing anything and everything in her power to get people to notice her. Though he learned the truth of her gender later on, Iruka knew an act when he saw one. Despite the cheerful clown she presented on the outside, he could still plainly see a child alone in the world crying out ‘Look at me! Don’t ignore me! Please don’t leave me all alone!’.

Though he had always tried to treat all of his students the same, it came as no surprise to Iruka that Naruto had managed to worm her way into a special place in his heart. And despite everything, he hadn’t objected one bit.

Thinking back, Iruka found himself smiling wistfully. He couldn’t help it! Who couldn’t help but love that little blond spaz once they really got to know her? She was honest, dedicated, and hard working. Once she set a goal for herself, she didn’t give up no matter what it took. If only more ninja could be like her!

‘That’s why…’ He stared down at his hands. “I want her to win…”

“You worry too much, Sensei!” Iruka looked up to see Konohamaru standing in front of him, flanked by Moegi and Udon on either side, with a wide grin on his face. “Naruto-nee is gonna win for sure!”

“Yeah right!” another boy sneered. “There’s no way that ditz can beat a Hyuuga!”
“You wanna bet!” Moegi growled, shaking a fist at him. The boy stepped back, cowering.

The chunin couldn’t help but chuckle, amused and glad to know the blonde had such steadfast support from the Konohamaru Corps. ‘I know she’ll be all right,’ he thought to himself. He gazed in the direction of the stadium, frowning at the dark smoke he saw rising into the air. ‘But I can’t help but feel that something is terribly wrong…’

oooo

Sakura stared with wide eyes at the chaos that had broken out over the stadium. Suna and Otogakure ninja had emerged out of hiding in the stands, attacking the Konoha nin that had been stationed as guards for the event.

“What’s going on?” she murmured aloud, staying close to her unconscious classmates. “Why are they fighting? Are we under attack?!”

A lone enemy nin spotted her awake, sneering underneath his uniform mask as he drew a kunai from his weapons pouch and jumped towards her. The young kunoichi gasped in fear, scrambling to do the same only to watch as the ninja was knocked to the ground by her jounin-instructor.

Kakashi landed nimbly on the back of the seat in front of hers, turning to her with an eye grin. “Hey there, Sakura,” he greeted cheerfully, as if there weren’t a full-scale battle waging around them. “Doin’ okay?”

“Kakashi-sensei!” she cried in relief. “What’s happening?”

Gai touched down beside them, eyes and body tense and alert for any signs of attack.

“It appears as if Oto and Sunagakure have allied themselves against us,” the droopy eyed jounin answered simply.

Sakura gasped. “So they’re invading us??”

“Afraid so…” Kakashi directed his gaze up towards the Kage box, that was currently filled with smoke. There was no sign of the Hokage or Kazekage. ‘The question is… Why…?’

“Kakashi,” Gai called, directed the two conscious members’ attention to him. “Your pupil is gone…”

“Naruto?”

Kakashi gazed down at the arena just as Sasuke vanished after the wall. Genma watched him go before turning his attention back to the Sand ninja in front of him. The three Suna genin were nowhere in sight. ‘Damn it… don’t tell me he sent him after that Gaara kid…’ “Sakura,” The Kunoichi snapped her head back to him. “I need to you wake Naruto and Shikamaru - I have a mission for you.”

She blinked in surprise. “A mission…?”

“It’s gonna be dangerous… possibly another A-rank.” He met her stunned expression with another eye-grin.
“Wh-what do we need to do?”

“I need you go after Sasuke. Find him and bring him back here…”

Her green eyes widened as she let out another gasp. “You mean you’re not coming with us?”

“I’m needed here,” he explained. “But there’s someone else I know who can help you.” He raised his hands, flying rapidly through a short series of signs before pressing his palm flat on a sleeping man’s back. “KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU!”

From out of smoke that followed the summoning emerged a small brown, droopy-eyed pug wearing the hitai-ate of the Leaf. He gazed up at them dully, raising his paw in greeting. “You rang?” he asked in a raspy voice.

Sakura’s jaw went slack.

“Sakura, this is Pakkun,” Kakashi replied, ignoring or either oblivious to her shocked expression. “He’s going to help you track down Sasuke.”

The dog nodded, trotting over to her side. “All right, girly. Let’s get a move on.”

A talking dog was going to lead them on an A-rank mission? This was a joke, right? “Sensei… you can’t be serious…”

“Don’t worry, Sakura,” he replied. “I know you can handle this. You’ve been training on your own, right?”

She blinked in surprise. ‘He knows about that…?’ “B-but, Sensei…”

“You can do this,” Sakura stared up at him, noting the seriousness of his expression. She hadn’t seen him look like that since Nami! “I have faith in you and Naru.”

Giving a hesitant nod, she rose from her seat and crept cautiously over towards her teammate. ‘Naru has gotten a lot stronger in the past month…’ she told herself, thinking back over the blonde’s fight with Neji. ‘I just hope that it’s enough…’

Naruto opened her eyes to darkness once again. ‘Not this again…’ she grumbled to herself. “What the hell’s goin’ on?”

~ CAN’T YOU TELL? ~ the Kyuubi’s voice echoed around her. ~ YOU’RE STUCK IN A GENJUTSU. ~

“Wha…? Really? Damn it, I hate those things!”

The demon let out a tragic sigh. ~ TO THINK THE MASTER OF ALL MANNER OF TRICKERY SHOULD BE BOUND TO SUCH A… NOVICE… ~

“Shut up!” Naruto snapped, her brow ticking in annoyance. “If you’re so freakin’ great, show me
how to break out of this stupid thing!"

~ WHY BOTHER? ~ the kitsune sniffed. ~ THE LITTLE PINK APE IS ROUSING YOU AS WE SPEAK… ~ It paused, its voice turning smug once more. ~ HAPPY WAKING… ~

The blonde growled in frustration. ‘Stupid ass fox…’ Closing her eyes and opening once again, she was greeted with the image of her teammate leaning over her with an expectant expression on her face. “Neechan!”

Sakura’s eyes lit up in relief. “Ah! Naru-kun! It worked!”

Opening her mouth to reply, Naruto halted when she spotted an Oto-ninja dropping down out of the rafters towards them. “Look out!” Grabbing Sakura by the shoulders, she rolled out of the way, narrowly avoiding his strike. Backing up to the wall, Naruto reached for a kunai to ward off the next attack, only to watch as he was plowed through the thick wall courtesy of one Azure Beast of Konoha.

“Gai-sensei!”

Dusting off his hands, he grinned down at them with shiny teeth. “Good to see you up and about, Naru-san!”

She blinked up at him. “When did you get here? And where’s Lee?” She paused, searching worriedly until she spotted him slumped over in his seat, unconscious. She started to rise, stopping when she noticed that everyone else was unconscious as well. Those that weren’t were engaged in what looked to be a battle to the death with other ninja. “What’s going on?”

Sakura grabbed her arm, pulling her to her feet. “I’ll explain later,” she said. “But right now I gotta go wake Shikamaru--” At the mention of his name, said boy twitched slightly. Sakura stared at him incredulously. “You mean to say that you were awake this whole time?! You slacker!!”

Pakkun sighed heavily, trotting over to the boy and sinking his teeth in the reclining boy’s hand. Shikamaru shot up with a yelp, grabbing the dog by his cheeks and giving them a tug. “What the hell…?” He released the dog, rubbing his hand in annoyance. “Was that necessary, ya flea bag?”

“S’matter of fact, it was,” Pakkun sniffed. “Ya got a mission.”

“Man… how troublesome… I’ve have my fill of life-threatening situations, thanks…”

“Now, now, children,” Kakashi chided. “You need to get moving.”

“Sensei…?” Naruto blinked in confusion.

“Sasuke-kun has gone after Gaara and his teammates…” Sakura explained.

Shikamaru groaned. “That kid’s definitely unstable…” Whether he was referring to Gaara or Sasuke, no one bothered to ask him to clarify.

“Which is why you have to stop Sasuke from confronting him,” Kakashi said instead. “Pakkun will lead the way.”
“Damn it, I knew this was gonna happen!”

‘Which is why I should have listened to you…’ The one eyed jounin remained silent. Now was not the time for a heart to heart, no matter how necessary it might seem.

“Enough talk,” Pakkun barked. “Let’s get a move on - this ain’t a field trip we’re goin’ on!”

Naruto nodded, turning to the other two genin beside her. “Sakura, Shikamaru,” Both of them gave a resolute nod before taking off through the hole in the wall that Gai had so graciously provided them.

“Be careful…” Kakashi watched them vanish over the rooftops before turning back to his own fight.

~ End Chapter 16
Chapter 17: The Yellow Flash

Chapter Summary

War erupts in Konoha.

Chapter 17

Amidst the chaos and confusion erupting over the stadium, Sarutobi suddenly found himself in a precarious situation. He stood above the smoking remains of the Kage box, staring down the Suna leader that had just declared war upon his village.

"Kazekage," he said in a steely tone, his eyes focused on the robed man in front of him. "What is the meaning of this?"

The Kazekage only chuckled. "I believe I have made our intentions quite clear," he murmured. Raising his hand, he gestured to the four Oto-nin that had been masquerading as his entourage. The moment they had surfaced on the rooftops, the four peculiar looking nin had raised a large and powerful shield, blocking out the ANBU that had tried to come to his aid.

The old Hokage's face was solemn and stern. "I see that you and Otogakure have allied yourselves against us..." He paused, frowning in confusion. "But why? Surely we can resolve any grievances without resorting to bloodshed...!"

Eyes narrowing, the other kage replied dryly, "Only you would suggest such a thing. Peace has made this village soft and weak..." He paused, his eyes mocking. "You most of all... Sarutobi..."

Sarutobi's eyes widened. It was rare for a Kage's given name to be known outside of his village, and he certainly never recalled divulging that information to the Kazekage. Who was this person really...?

As if he were privy to his unspoken question, the other ninja reached up to his head, removing the wide-brimmed kage hat and scarf that concealed his features, revealing a face Sarutobi had prayed never to have to see again. Recognizing the yellow, snake-like eyes instantly, the old Hokage let out a gasp of outrage. "Orochimaru!"

"So you remember me, after all..." The Snake Ninja grinned back at him, his expression sadistic. "That's so good to know... Sarutobi-sensei."

oooo

A lone ANBU stood on a rooftop neighboring the stadium, surveying the carnage as calmly as one would a tree blowing in the wind. He made no move to join in and fight, remaining in his relaxed stand even as a squad of Otogakure ninja suddenly appeared around him.

"You're here," he replied cheerfully. "Good!" Reaching up to his face, he removed his porcelain mask to reveal the wire-rimmed glasses and silver hair of one Yakushi Kabuto.
“Orders?” one ninja, obviously the captain of the squadron, questioned gruffly.

Kabuto turned to him, smiling serenely. “The Uchiha’s teammates and one of their old classmates have gone off to intercept him.” he explained, his expression showing no upset at relaying this news. “It’s your team’s job to stop them. They can’t be allowed to interfere with the plan.”

“Three Leaf Genin?” the captain scoffed. “They hardly seem worth our attention.” He reached into the pocket of his vest, drawing out three of the traitorous leaf-genin's information cards. The faces of Naruto, Sakura, and Shikamaru stared back up at him, displaying all of their general info. He glanced up at Kabuto, his expression smug. “Even your cards say that they're weak.”

Kabuto smirked back at him. “You've seen for yourself that my cards aren't always accurate,” he replied. “My info is based off of what I’ve seen and heard while here on reconnaissance. But--” He paused, his own tone turning smug as he gave the group an appraising look. “Any *good* ninja knows that's hardly anything to go by.”

The Oto-nin all scowled at the thinly-veiled insult.

Unconcerned, Kabuto raised his mask again, fixing it back in place on his face. “In any case,” he continued. “You should hurry... They've already got some distance on you.”

“Pah, it don't matter.” the captain spat. “They're as good as dead already.” He turned to his subordinates, his expression fierce. “Move out!” Tensing his legs to jump, he vanished from the rooftop in a blur of movement.

“Ryoukai!” All of his squad vanished moments afterwards, leaving the pseudo-ANBU alone on the rooftop once more.

Kabuto glanced out into the forest, the expression beneath his mask almost wistful. ‘It's a pity I couldn't be the one to hunt you down...' he thought with a inward sigh. ‘I confess I am curious to see the extent of your power as well... Uzumaki Naru.'

He thought briefly of the blonde's fight against the Hyuuga, all the power she had displayed. It took an almost conscious effort to quell the feelings of excitement surging within him. After all, he had his own job to do - back in the Stadium.

Forming a quick hand sign, he vanished from the rooftop in a cloud of smoke.

oooo

Leaves and branches zipped past him in a blur, but Sasuke paid them no heed. He continued vaulting through the forest canopy, intent on catching up to the Suna siblings.

~ “You didn't get to finish your fight, right?” ~ Genma had asked him casually, keeping calm eyes on the Sand Jounin that had appeared in front of them. He shifted his shoulder casually, gesturing to the back wall the three genin had vanished over. ~ “Now's your chance.” ~

Sensing him to be in possession of great power, Sasuke had been itching to fight Gaara the moment he laid eyes on him. And if the other boy's words were anything to go by, he had felt the same.

~ "You are strong... I can tell just by looking at you..." ~
He smirked at the thought; however, the feeling was short lived when the redhead's next words rose to his mind.

~ "Though I wonder... how strong she is..." ~

A dark scowl formed across the Uchiha's face.

~ "She will be... after I kill you..." ~

What was it? What was it about the other boy's words that had caused him to get so angry? Was it the fact that he considered to be a stronger opponent than him?

~ "Weak... Your hatred is not strong enough..." ~

The sudden feeling of anger that surged up within him caused the Curse Seal on his neck to twinge lightly in pain. Sasuke had to take a few deep breaths to suppress its power once more. He felt a moment's relief that the seal's almost-activation had not slowed his progress, but he was confused as to what had caused it to react. Kakashi had warned him that the seal fed off of his negative emotions and instructed him to maintain them at all times, but deep down he couldn't help but wonder. Was it anger he felt at the injury to his pride?

~ Or are you jealous...? ~ a voice intoned. ~ Jealous that he finds your teammate more interesting than you? Or that when they meet, she might feel the same...? ~

His eyes widened in surprise. 'Where the HELL did that come from?' He nearly faltered, regaining his composure at the last minute to keep him from missing his next landing point. He couldn't think about things like that right now - ('...Especially when they're not true!' he added savagely to himself.) he had three ninja to track down and a fight to finish.

It was almost like a mission, right?

~ "Let me kill you so I can feel alive!" ~

Sasuke scowled lightly at the memory, the look in Gaara's eyes as he spoke standing out in his mind. 'He's not right...' he thought to himself. 'In fact, he's downright insane...' Landing on a low tree branch, Sasuke smirked. "I can't wait to really fight him."

~ "You better win your fight." ~ Naruto had said to him. Somewhere, deep within, a part of him felt glad that she was no longer looking at him with that same cagey wariness she had since their time in the Forest of Death. Following his fight with Akado, there had been no time to ask what it was exactly he had done to create such a look, but if he were to be truly honest with himself... he hadn't liked it all...

~ "Don't forget, you an' I got to face each other, too!" ~

'I'm here to fight strong opponents,' He thought to himself as he continued his trek. 'Only by doing so will I ever improve enough to face Itachi.' For the first time, at the mention of his name, his brother's face did not appear. Naruto's face flashed before him once more instead. Clenching his fists, he felt another surge of emotion - this time anticipation. The seal twinged a little once more, but this time he ignored it in favor of the three figures in the distance.
Temari and Kankuro halted their mad dash through the forest with their semi-conscious brother in
tow when they sensed the other boy's presence behind them. Turning, they stared up at him, their
bodies tensed for his oncoming attack.

Sharingan activated, Sasuke stared back with a smirk on his face. "Going somewhere?"

"That stupid, selfish, uptight, self-serving, tight-fisted, no-good chicken butt-haired, pin-wheely
eyed, delusions of vengeance-having, jerkishly arrogant asshole!"

"Then it should be!" she protested. "They can put his picture next to it in the Dictionary!"

"Don't say that, Naruto!" Sakura scolded, the Fangirl in her rising up in indignation. "Sasuke-kun
is not 'jerkish'!" She blushed, trying to recount the rest of the blonde's string of insults. "And he
doesn't have chicken-butt hair, either..."

Despite her anger at the situation, the other kunoichi snickered. "If you say so, Neechan."

The two girls burst into giggles while Shikamaru looked on, his expression a mixture of horror and
confusion. 'Girls...!' he thought to him, grimacing. 'I'll never understand them...!'}

Ahead of them, Pakkun's ears twitched, bringing some semblance of a frown to his canine face. "I
hate to break up the party, kiddos," he muttered. The three genin glanced up at him. "But we're
being followed."

They all sobered instantly. "Wha...? By who...?"

The small pug closed his eyes, concentrating. "Eight... no, nine ninja... most likely jounin given
their size."

"Reinforcements?" Naruto asked hopefully.

"Doubt it," Shikamaru answered, frowning once more. "Man... how troublesome..."

Glancing back over her shoulder, Naruto strained to determine the identities of their pursuers with
little success. Apparently a Summon's senses were far keener than even a Jinchuuriki's. "How far
off are they...?"

"Still a way's back. But..."

"Then we can't worry 'bout 'em right now," she interrupted. "We have a mission to carry out. We
gotta stop Sasuke!" She glanced over at Sakura, who nodded back to her in agreement.

Shikamaru studied the two of them, noting the resolve evident on both their faces with a loud
groan. "I KNEW these Exams were gonna be troublesome....!"
His kage robes cast aside, Sarutobi faced down the other ninja on the rooftop donned in his own battle attire. Orochimaru, S-Rank criminal formerly of Konohagakure... one of the Legendary Three, and his once most prized pupil... He narrowed his eyes in anger. "Why have you returned here?"

The Snake Master chuckled. "Should I need a reason?" he countered. "This is my home village, after all."

"There is no love lost between you and this village. We all know that," Sarutobi shot back. "You turned your back on Konoha, becoming a criminal!"

Orochimaru smirked. "And I have you to thank for that, don't I, Sarutobi-sensei?"

The old ninja frowned, memories of mistakes past rushing through his mind as he glared back at his ex-pupil. "If only I had known," he murmured quietly. "The lengths you would go to pursue your wicked goals...."

"And then what?" Serpentine eyes sneered at him. "I was your favorite student, wasn't I? You always said how I showed such promise... the pride of Team 7."

The Hokage grimaced. "There is more to being a ninja than your knowledge of jutsu, Orochimaru," he said finally. "Surely I taught you that."

"But there is so much pleasure to be had the pursuit of knowledge - knowledge of all jutsu, that is!" the other ninja exclaimed, throwing out his arms wide. He paused, grinning deviously. "I really should thank you, Sensei; had you not passed me over for the seat of Yondaime Hokage--"

Sarutobi blinked in surprise, his expression incredulous. "Is this what this is about?" he asked. "Revenge?"

"That is a logical assumption to make," Orochimaru conceded. "But incorrect, nonetheless. I do despise this village, but even I cannot deny the benefits it offers me..."

"Benefits...?"

He grinned knowingly. "This village is reputed as being the largest store of Kekkei Genkai of all the Hidden Villages," he explained. "The Hyuuga Byakugan, the Uchiha Sharingan..."

"So you are after Uchiha Sasuke?"

"Very good, Sensei! At last you understand!" Orochimaru's expression turned eager. "I desire jutsu. ALL jutsu. With the Sharingan in my possession, no jutsu - forbidden or not - will be beyond my reach."

The old kage wanted to mention that did not include other kekkei genkai like the Byakugan, but he was certain that his student did not care. He shifted, sliding his body into a battle-ready stance. "I will not allow it," he ground out.

"Will you? You couldn't stop me before - what will make now any different?" Sarutobi scowled, but the Snake ninja wasn't fazed. "I've learned a great number of kinjutsu since leaving this meek
"little village," he said, grinning. "Shall I show you?"

Before the Hokage could even reply, the other man's hands were flying through hand seals in a blur. Forming the final seal, Orochimaru's expression was manically devious.

"Kuchiyose: EDO TENSEI!!!"

Eyes wide, Sarutobi stared in horror as the jutsu took affect.

oooo

Miles away, Naruto faltered on a tree branch, bringing a hand to her stomach. 'Wha... what the hell...?'

Noticing the absence of her presence beside them, the others looked back at her in worry.

"Naruto...?" Sakura called.

The blonde remained still, trying to determine the cause of the strange sensation she'd experienced. It was almost like something had been ripped from her, except there hadn't been any pain - only a strange feeling of emptiness when it was gone.

"Naruto..." Shikamaru placed a hand on her shoulder, searching her face for any signs of her ailment. "What happened...?"

"Uh... nothing..." She shook her head, trying to regain her bearings. She turned inward to the fox for answers. 'Oi, what'd you do, Kitsune?'

~ *IT WAS NOT ME*, ~ the Kyuubi sullenly replied. ~ *I ASSURE YOU*...~

She scowled at the fox's less than enlightening response. Straightening up, her eyes hardened once more. "Let's keep going!" Without waiting for a response, she bounded off once more.

The other two stared at her back, twin expressions of confusions on their faces.

'What the hell was that about...?'

oooo

Temari and Kankuro stared down the Uchiha, waiting for the younger boy to make his move.

Turquoise eyes narrowing, Temari glanced at her brother sideways. "Kankurou," she called. The puppeteer glanced over at her out of the corner of his eye, keeping the majority of his attention on the Leaf Genin still several yards away. "Take Gaara and go."

He froze, turning to gawk at her in disbelief. "What?! No way, Temari!"

"Just do it!" she snapped, relinquishing her hold on the unresponsive redhead. Kankuro readjusted his grip, keeping his incredulous gaze on her. "Gaara can't fight right now," she continued. "We need to keep him safe. He's too important for us to lose!"

"I know, but..."
"Then do as I say and go!" Turning her back to him, she withdrew her large fan from its holster, spreading it open with a quick snap of her wrist. "I'll handle the Uchiha."

Sasuke snorted. "Yeah right."

Scowling at his attitude, the Suna kunoichi raised her fan high, bringing it down heavily to create a huge gale force wind. The Uchiha dove behind a tree just in time, narrowly avoiding being ripped to shreds by the cutting winds.

Temari snapped her head back to her brothers, her eyes wide and pleading. "Now, Kankuro!"

Hearing the desperation in his older sister's usually steadfast tone, Kankuro relented. "Right!" Securing his grip on Gaara once more, he bounded away from them in a flash.

Catching their movement from his hiding spot, Sasuke growled in annoyance, drawing a handful of shuriken from his weapons pouch. "You're not going anywhere!" he exclaimed, hurling them at the pair's unprotected back.

Another rush of wind blew them off course. Temari touched down in front of him, raising her fan for another attack. "Pay attention to me!" she said with a fierce snarl. "*I'm* your opponent now!"

Unfazed by her tone, the dark-haired genin smirked once again, "If that's the way you want it."

The kunoichi mirrored his expression, the look in her eyes promising pain. "Let's dance."

oooo

"Pakkun," Sakura replied, turning to the little dog as they rushed through the forest. "Are those ninja still following us?"

"You bet, girlie," the little dog answered gruffly, keeping his gaze straight ahead. "And they're gaining on us, too."

"Perfect, just perfect." Shikamaru complained. He stopped in his tracks, gazing back the way they had come with a look of disdain.

Several trees ahead, Naruto stopped, frowning at the expression on the normally laid-back boy's face. "Shikamaru? What're you doing?"

"You two keep going," he replied. "I'll hold 'em off for as long as I can."

Sakura gasped in horror.

"Like hell you will!" Naruto yelled. "Eight against one? I thought you were just lazy, not stupid!"

He rolled his eyes. "It's pointless for either of you two stay behind--"

Cracking her knuckles, Sakura gave the boy a look promising pain. "If you say it's because we're girls," she warned. "You are *so* gonna get it, Nara."

"Uchiha's your teammate," he explained hurriedly, a bead of sweat rolling down the side of his
"Damn, I knew Haruno got scary when she's pissed, but this is crazy!" "Only the two of you have any chance of talkin' some sense into him," He paused, glancing over at Naruto. "Or beating it into him, if necessary."

"This is dumb," the blonde exclaimed. "How are you supposed to--"

"I don't hafta beat 'em..." Shikamaru cut her off. "Just slow 'em down. With my family's jutsu, I'm the best suited for the job."

"The kid's got a point." Pakkun conceded.

A dozen scenarios zipping rapidly through her brain, Naruto glared at the boy, biting her lip in apprehension. After a few minutes of silence, she let out a growl of frustration. "You better not die, Shikamaru!"

He merely rolled his eyes. "Puh... dying would be too troublesome." He turned away once more, waving a hand in dismissal. "Now beat it before I change my mind."

The two kunoichi regarded each other with hesitant expressions. As if sharing some silent communication, they both gave a brief nod before leaping away. Shikamaru watched them go out of the corner of his eye, waving a hand half heartedly in farewell.

'You better not die either... Naru...'

Pakkun bounded beside the two remaining genin, his own expression showing his agitation. Kakashi had asked him to look after the three kids; how could he do that when one was staying behind to protect the others?

"That kid gonna be all right?" he asked quietly.

"He better be..." Naruto growled. "Or else *I'll* kill him!"

Sarutobi watched with horrified eyes as Orochimaru executed his forbidden jutsu. 'Edo Tensei... if that means what I think it means...' He started at the three coffins slowly rising out of the ground. 'I must stop it from completing itself!' His hands flying through a rapid series of signs, a barrage of shuriken appeared out of nowhere, raining down open the three coffins.

Orochimaru only laughed out loud. "Ah, ah, Sensei... it won't be so easy!" He, too, began a series of handsigns, raising a large hunk of earth out of the ground to act as a shield for the coffin rising up in the middle.

The older ninja's eyes narrowed in confusion. 'He protected the middle coffin only...' he remarked to himself. 'Why...?'

At the Hokage's visible consternation, the younger ninja only grinned as he dispelled the shield. The rock crumbled and fell away, leaving the middle coffin completely in tact. After a few tense moments, the lid slowly creaked open and a tall figure stepped out into the open.

His heart surely skipping a beat, Sarutobi reeled back in shock. "Impossible!"
"I'm afraid not, Sensei," Orochimaru replied. "You see, I have been planning this moment for quite some time. Many nights I pondered how marvelous it would be for the Great and Wise Sandaime Hokage to fall at the hands of his once most prized pupil." He grinned at the thought, no doubt imaging such scenarios in his demented mind. "But then I realized that there really would be no more fitting end than at the hands of his successor..."

From beyond the barrier, several of the young ANBU monitoring the fight looked at each other in confusion. They gazed at the figure standing before the coffin, puzzling as to why he looked so familiar.

"Taichou," one of the younger ANBU donning a bird mask said, turning to their squad leader. Said ninja was quaking like a leaf. "Who is that...?"

Though it was impossible to determine his expression from behind the porcelain Bear mask, the captain's tone was a mixture of reverence and horror. "I don't believe it..." he whispered. "It's---"

Sarutobi gazed at the blue eyes and blonde hair of the younger man standing in front of him. "Yondaime-sama..."

The figure glanced up at him with dull, lifeless eyes, remaining silent.

"Is this some sort of illusion?"

"Illusion?" Orochimaru feigned an expression of hurt. "Of course not, Sensei! But, if you don't believe me... why don't you ask him yourself..." He stepped up beside the blonde, resting a hand on his shoulder. "Isn't that so, Minato...?"

His name spoken, life seemed to return to the young man's eyes before they took on a more hooded, haunted look. "Sarutobi-occhan..."

The honorific attached to his name rid the old man of any doubts, robbing the breath his body. Seeing those eyes locked on him doubled the heavy weight of guilt upon his chest. "Minato... I---"

The Snake Master gazed upon the pair in mock sympathy, though it was obvious that he was enjoying every minute of this. "I know how awkward this must be for you, Sensei... facing your old successor..." He grinned. "You had such high hopes for the boy - you always said he showed such promise... It's really rather ironic... How it must feel knowing how horribly you failed..."

The guilt doubled once more, but Sarutobi kept his face masked in a displeased frown directed towards his old student.

"Sarutobi..." The younger blonde was still staring at him, his gaze accusing now. "I depended on you..."

His defenses cracking slightly, the Hokage stared at the ground. "Forgive me, Minato-kun..."

"He can't." Orochimaru answered. "I won't let him." He drew forth a kunai with red ofuda tied on the end. A wicked grin on his face, he rammed it into Minato's back. The blonde didn't flinch, although his eyes became dull and lifeless once more.

"What have you done, Orochimaru?" Sarutobi demanded.
"Don't you understand yet, Old Man?" he asked with a sneer. "I've brought the dead back to life!"

'But that should not have been possible...' the Hokage thought. 'Not the Yondaime's soul... Unless...'

Watching the expressions flit across the old man's face, Orochimaru smirked once more. "I laugh every time I think about it," he remarked. "The foolish boy gave up his life to seal away the Great Bijuu... and the very people he died to protect do nothing to honor his Legacy."

Tensing, Sarutobi stared back the Sannin in alarm. "You know...?"

"What are they talking about?" Bird asked.

Tiger and Boar shushed him.

"Don't take me for a fool," Orochimaru snorted. "I've seen the brat. How no one else has figured out the truth is beyond me." He shook his head reproachfully. "This village is full of fools..."

The Hokage was still concerned. How is it he could have known...? He paused, remembering his conversation with Jiraiya during the Intermission.

~ "It's about Naruto..." ~ he'd said, his expression far more solemn than he could ever recall seeing it. ~ "The Seal's been altered." ~

He gazed at the Sannin angrily. "If you have done anything to harm that child..." he warned.

Orochimaru only laughed. "The Jinchuuriki is of no concern of mine," he chuckled. "And besides, when it comes to damage... I'd say the worst has already been done!"

oooo

Even as she ran through the forest, Naruto turned her concentration inward, willing herself to the deepest parts of her subconscious where the youkai could usually be found. Had the circumstances been different, Naruto might have wondered why such a task was becoming far easier to do. However, given that things were as they were now, the blonde found she had far more pressing things to worry about.

'Oi! What happened back there, Kitsune?' she demanded, appearing in her mindscape. 'And don't tell me you don't know~-' Her eyes widened when they fell upon the Bijuu's cage. The paper seal that had first caught her eye looked as if someone had attempted to rip it down, only halfway succeeding. The remaining scrap blew faintly against the large bars, the kanji written on its surface completely indiscernible.

'What the hell...?'

~ GIVEN YOUR REACTION, I SUPPOSE I NEED NOT EXPLAIN... ~ the Kyuubi replied wryly.

'Like Hell!' the blonde exclaimed. 'If the Seal's gone, why aren't you?'

The fox snorted. ~ I HAD NO IDEA YOU SO LONGED FOR DEATH. ~ The blonde blinked in
confusion. ~ THE SEAL MERELY KEEPS ME LOCKED WITHIN THIS FORSAKEN CAGE AND AWAY FROM YOUR EASILY IMPRESSIONABLE APE-LIKE MIND. ~ The blonde made a rude gesture at this which was easily ignored as the fox continued on. ~ I AM STILL TRAPPED INSIDE THIS HELL HOLE. ~

Naruto scowled, her suspicion purely evident. 'And you can't escape?'

~ WHY SHOULD I? I'VE NO DESIRE TO WALK AROUND POSING AS A WHELP LIKE YOU. ~

Given the insult couldn't really be construed as a dig at her height - or lack thereof - Naruto let in slide in favor of asking a question that had been bothering her for quite some time. "Then what DO you want?"

The Kyuubi paused a moment. ~ TO KILL... ~ Naruto tensed. ~ THE ONE WHO CALLS HIMSELF OROCHIMARU... ~

oooo

Sasuke dove behind the trunk of another large tree, grimacing at the hunks of wood being torn away under the onslaught of Temari’s fan. Needless to say the fight was starting to get tedious; short-range combat had always been his preference.

On the other side of the clearing, the sandy-haired kunoichi scowled in annoyance. If only she could lay one hit on him! Dark hair peered around the side of the tree, and Temari drew several kunai from her weapons pouch. "You can't hide forever!"

The Uchiha dodged the blades easily, using the tree branch as a spring board to propel him upwards and over the attack. He grabbed hold of the branch, preparing to swing under and double back for an attack of his own when his eyes widened at the sight of the two kunai embedded in the wood. Two exploding tags dangled on the end, activating with that telltale spark before detonating in his face.

Temari smirked as the boy's tree exploded in a shower of sawdust and splinters. "Well," she remarked casually. "That takes care of that!"

"You think so?"

Turquoise eyes widened at the sight of shuriken shooting out of the smoke, flaming garrote wires circling around her. Only quick hand seals and a kawarimi kept her from being sliced to ribbons. She touched down in a nearby tree, eyes darting around for any sign of attack. 'Where is he...?' she asked, wracking her brain for a new strategy. "Show yourself!"

"Gladly!" Sasuke appeared in a blur behind her, ramming his foot into her back. Using the force of his kick and gravity against her, he spun around once before bringing his leg down on her stomach, sending her hurtling towards the ground. "SHISHI RENDAN!!"

The kunoichi hit the unyielding earth with a heavy thud, the breath escaping her in a harsh gasp. She struggled to rise, eyes widening in horror when her body would not obey her commands. 'Damn it - out of chakra!'
She waited with uneven breaths as the younger boy touched down a few yards away. He stalked towards her slowly, as a cat would its prey. Pausing, he gave her a look one might give one inferior. Despite her pain and exhaustion, Temari scowled in anger. 'How...?' she thought to herself. 'How is it that he beat me...?'

The Uchiha sighed in annoyance, deactivating his Sharingan. "I don't have time to mess around any more..." Turning his back to her, he scoffed and leaped away.

Once he was out of sight, Temari let out a breath of relief before scowling at her own weakness. Clenching her hands in the grass beneath her, she stared up into the sky. Had she given her brothers enough time, she wondered. "Kankuro... Gaara... I hope you two are all right..."

oooo

Special Interrogation Squad Captain Morino Ibiki stared at the carnage unfolding within the stadium in the distance. His scarred face set in a frown, he glanced back as several ninja under his command materialized on the rooftop behind him.

"Taichou!" one ninja exclaimed, eyes widening at the sight. "What in Shodaime's name is going on?"

Ibiki's expression remained grim. "We're under attack," he said solemnly. "Otogakure and Sunagakure have allied themselves against us."

Several of his subordinates gasped in shock.

"We have to notify Hokage-sama!"

"He already knows," Ibiki responded. "He's in the Stadium right now, facing off against Orochimaru as we speak..."

Just the mere mention of the name had the battle-hardened ninja shuddering in fear.

"Orochimaru...?"

"One of the Legendary Three?"

"An S-rank criminal..." Visualizing those reptilian eyes gazing back at him, the scarred jounin trembled slightly. "I've never met a man more dark or sinister..." he murmured. "That man... is terrifying to me..."

His men stared at him in awe, the same thought running through their minds simultaneously. 'A man exists that can scare Morino Ibiki...? Unreal!!'

"Taichou, what's our move?"

The question snapped Ibiki out of his reverie, and his eyes hardened once more. "Half of our squadron will provide support to the ninja fending off the enemy at the Main gate," he ordered. "And the other half--"

The rest of his words were drowned out by a loud rumbling sound, followed shortly after by a deafening explosion. All heads shot towards the east, where the Main gate to the village
vanished under the crushing weight of a humungous three headed snake. It towered over everything, crushing any of the ninja that rose up to attack it.

"Damn it! What is that thing?!"

"Change of plans!" Ibiki roared. "Everyone - stop that thing!"

"Ryoukai!"

The group rushed forward to attack, halted in their tracks by a familiar voice calling out overhead. "Kuchiyose: YAFAI KUZUSHI NO JUTSU!"

A giant toad dropped down out of the sky, landing down upon the three heads with a echoing crash. Once the tremors stopped, a white-haired figure could been seen atop the giant amphibian. He did a strange, hopping little jig before striking a gallant pose.

"Is that...?"

"Put your worried little minds at ease, boys and girls! The Great and Wonderful Sage of Myoboku-zan, Jiraiya of the Legendary Three is here!"

"Jiraiya-sama!" Ibiki called, watching as the older ninja vanished from his perch, appearing before them with a cocky smirk on his face.

"Why, if it isn't Morino Ibiki," the Sannin grinned. "My, how you've grown! I remember when you were just a little pup!"

The Interrogation Squad captain grimaced slightly, ignoring the light coughs and snickering behind him. "But you haven't changed at all, eh, Jiraiya-sama?"

The other ninja shrugged. "Like the saying goes, 'If it ain't broke, don't try an' fix it'..." He paused, gazing at the large snake that had finally ceased its struggles under his toad, vanishing in a large poof of smoke. Danger averted, he released his Summon, frowning thoughtfully. "Orochimaru, huh..."

Beside him, Ibiki nodded gravely. "He's at the Stadium fighting Hokage-sama," he replied. "His men have raised a barrier so powerful our ANBU can't get through."

Jiraiya's frown remained in place. "So the Old Man's on his own..." He gazed in the direction of the Stadium, his hand clenched tightly at his side. 'You better be careful... Sensei...'"

oo Flashback oo

"Takin' up a little light reading, Sensei...?"

Shoving a familiar little orange book into one of his many desk drawers, Sarutobi turned to face his window where a young, white haired ninja sat grinning at him knowingly.

He cleared his throat, shuffling a few papers around in a last ditch effort to look busy. "Just doing a little paper work, Jiraiya..." The young man raised an eyebrow at him doubtfully, as if to say 'Paperwork... right...'. "So, what brings you here?"
If possible, the jounin's grin widened. "Can't a man check in on his old sensei to see how he's doing...?"

"I suppose he could," Sarutobi conceded, smiling. "But we all know there's a reason behind everything you do, my boy."

He laughed, rubbing a hand through his wild hair. "Heh, guess you know me too well, Old Man..." he replied. "S'matter of fact, I wanted to introduce you to someone. He's heard a lot about you and wouldn't shut up 'til I agreed to let him meet you."

"Oh, is that so?"

The younger ninja nodded, turning his attention to the closed office door. "C'mon in, kid!"

The door opened, and into the room stepped a young boy with wild blonde hair and electric blue eyes. He approached the Hokage's desk, bowing low. "Hokage-sama," he greeted.

Jiraiya pulled a face. "Normally he's not so polite..." A small snicker could be heard from the boy. "Little brat."

The Hokage chuckled. "Ah yes, I remember now," he replied. "You're one of Jiraiya's students, yes?"

The boy nodded, bowing once again. "It's an honor to finally meet you, Hokage-sama," he said, grinning widely. "My name's Namikaze Minato, and I'm going to be your Successor!"

oo End Flashback oo

Sarutobi felt a sharp pang of sadness at that memory. The boy he'd met that day had held such hope, such spark for life... never in all his years would he have imagined himself facing off against the same young ninja, eyes dull and lifeless, his soul in the hands of a madman.

His eyes saddened as he evaded another strike from the blonde. 'You wanted to become Hokage because you desired to protect everyone in the village...' he thought painfully. 'And yet here you are, fighting against it..." How has it come to this?"

Minato paused, raising his hands through a long string of seals before stopping on Horse. He inhaled deeply, bringing his hand to his mouth. "Katon: KARYUU ENDAN!"

The Sandaime's eyes widened at the large, spiralling flame that shot out towards him. He jumped back, running through a long string of seals himself. "Katon: RYUUKA NO JUTSU!"

Outside the barrier, the ANBU stared in awe at the raw power on display before them.

"Incredible..." Tiger gasped. "Such power..."

"Hokage against Hokage..." Boar murmured. "The Yellow Flash against the Professor..."

Bear watched as the two figured danced around each other, unleashing attack upon attack upon each other - each one possessing over 1,000 jutsu in their arsenal. Still... He clenched his fists at his sides. "Sandaime is still a strong ninja," he replied, keeping his eyes on the fight. "But he's not the powerhouse he used to be..."
"What do you mean?" Bird asked. "He's got his experience as an advantage!"

"That may be true," Boar agreed. "But Yondaime-sama's got--"

At that very same moment, Sarutobi let out a strangled gasp of surprise as the Yondaime appeared before him in a blur, clamping a hand around his neck.

"--Hiraishin..."

Sarutobi winced in pain, spotting the specially made kunai a few feet away from them. He struggled against the grip to no avail. "Mi...na... to..."

The younger blonde's expression did not change. "Sarutobi-occhan..."

Watching from a distance, Orochimaru let out a gleeful chuckle. "Can you feel it, Sensei?" he asked. "All of your hope slowly draining away... your life?" He stepped closer, circling the pair like a beast of prey. "Now that you see your end, will you beg for mercy? Or while you die like a dog?"

"I will not beg....!" Sarutobi gasped out. "It... is an honor to die defending this village... and the people in it who are precious to me..."

"Ah yes," the Sannin sighed. "They will mourn your death, to be sure..." He paused, his expression turning positively sinister. "But once I crush them and this pitiful excuse for a village, they will perish cursing your name!"

In response to his words, Minato tightened his grip on the old man's windpipe.

"F-forgive me, Minato--" Sarutobi winced. "You depended on us to protect your Legacy... and yet we have failed you..." An image of a young child appeared in his mind. Blue eyes shone back at him, whiskered cheeks raised in a wide, happy grin.

His eyes watered slightly. "But despite that the child has grown up strong and true..." he continued. "Naruto loves this village as much as I do, as much as *you* do... which is why..." He raised a hand to his mouth slowly, nicking his finger. "I must defeat you now!" He ran through the familiar hands signs quickly, pressing his palm flat against the young ninja's chest. "KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU - Monkey King Enma!"

Smoke exploded outwards, and the Yondaime was knocked back. Hitting the ground with a thud, he looked up to find himself staring into the growling maw of a large, white-haired ape bearing the hitai ate of the Leaf.

Orochimaru scowled in annoyance.

Enma, king of the Ape Summons stared down at the ninja beneath him, eyes widening in shock and recognition. "Sarutobi! What is the meaning of this?"

Rubbing his neck gingerly, Sarutobi's expression was stoic as he answered raspily, "The Yondaime's soul has been brought back under Orochimaru's control."

"Orochimaru?" The Ape snarled in fury, zoning in on the snake ninja. Orochimaru merely scowled
back. "You did not kill him when you had the chance?"

The Sandaime frowned.

"A fact I'm sure he laments daily," Orochimaru jeered.

"I spared you because I had hope you still had a chance at redemption..." Sarutobi replied. "But I soon realized your soul had been wicked from the very beginning..." He lowered his eyes in shame. "I merely blinded myself to the truth..."

Orochimaru yawned, his expression one of disinterest. "Poor Sensei... you've been such a fool, haven't you?" He grinned wickedly. "And now you shall pay for your mistakes... With your life!" Pressing his hands against his abdomen, he expelled a snake holding a wicked looking blade within its jaws. Spinning his head around, Orochimaru rushed towards his old teacher with murder in his eyes. "NOW DIE~~!"

~ End Chapter 17
Chapter 18: I Will Protect You

Chapter Summary

How far are you willing to go to protect those you care about?

Chapter 18

In the aftermath of the Second Shinobi War, people were panicky and frightened. Ninja left the safety of Konoha's walls on missions daily, knowing that it was quite possible that they would not return. Those that remained behind had no choice but to wait for their return, hoping that within the village's walls they would remain safe.

How were they supposed to react when it was learned that such a fact was not true?

When the number of missing persons within the village began to rise to an all new high, tensions were at the verge of reaching the breaking point. Was it possible that one of their own had betrayed them? There were too many questions and not enough answers - with the pressure of war looming on the horizon, the Sandaime took it upon himself to lead the search. After following a few leads the culprit was soon made clear...

The Legendary Snake Ninja, Orochimaru.

It was a hard pill to swallow, but the evidence was crystal clear. With the aid of ANBU, the snake's motives were quickly uncovered, his lair revealed. His wicked acts were open for all to see - human experimentation, on his own countrymen! And for what - the quest for knowledge?!

Sarutobi remembered confronting his old pupil, demanding an explanation for his misdeeds. Not only had he shown no remorse, but the younger ninja had actually felt pleased at his accomplishments! And on that day, the Sandaime knew what his heart had refused to believe for so long... Orochimaru was twisted, his soul pitch black. He took pleasure out of causing others suffering and sought only to further his own gains. He was truly evil.

'And yet I let him escape...' He remembered that day with crystal clarity. Staring at his old student's back as he fled the scene of his lair, leaving his failed experiments and several dead ANBU in his wake. Sarutobi had had the power to stop him that day, had had ample reasoning and oppurtunity, and yet he had not acted. 'Even knowing what you were and what you had done my pride still would not let me accept that I had failed...'

Despite everything, Sarutobi knew he was responsible for Orochimaru's actions. In his younger days as the jounin instructor of Team 7, he had prided himself in being responsible in the training of such a promising young genin. He had nurtured the boy's talent, urging him to learn and further improve himself, holding him up as a model to which his remaining two students should strive towards.

'I rested all of my hopes on you, my prized pupil, neglecting the two that would remain loyal...' Their faces flashed briefly through his mind and the old ninja felt a pang of regret. In reality, all of
his students had left him. Orochimaru, defected... Tsunade, all but disavowed... The only student who truly remained was Jiraiya, and the last time he had spoken to him had been regarding Naruto and her seal...

At the mention of the subject, Sarutobi frowned in remembrance of the night the Kyuubi had attacked the village. Though there had been word of the Bijuu's rampage across Fire Country, the reasoning behind the demon's attack remained unknown even to this day. There was no proof to substantiate the claim, but the old Hokage was almost certain Orochimaru had had something to do with it.

'I know not what you did to loose the Kyuubi's wrath upon us,' he thought with a frown. 'Revenge against the man who took the job you sought for your own or something far deeper? Your treachery continues even now as you use his soul for your own gain!'

As he spoke he dodged the strike of Orochimaru's Kusanagi, only to narrowly avoid a fatal blow from the Yondaime's own specially-designed kunai. The Kitsune's attack on the village had not been a coincidence - the blonde Hokage had suspected this as well, but in the end had had no choice but to sacrifice himself to protect the village.

'We lost Minato, but we thwarted your plans, my old student,' Sarutobi scowled. 'I vow that I will stop you today - using the very same jutsu thwarted you before!' He raised his hands, bringing them together in a familiar cross seal. "KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!"


"No!" Bear cried out, watching as the Hokage was flanked by two solid shadow clones.

"What's wrong, Taichou?" Bird asked. "Kage Bunshin gives him an advantage!"

"Not in this type of battle, it doesn't," Bear replied. "Yes, he now has greater numbers, but for each clone he makes his own chakra is divided."

"Damn, that's right..." Tiger groaned. "And when you count in the chakra he already used to summon Enma-sama, Hokage-sama will be considerably weakened."

"I see..." Bird lowered his head, clenching his fists at his sides. "I hope he still has enough to win."

Bird nodded his head in agreement, turning his attention back towards the ensuing battle. "So do we..."


"Pathetic old man!" Orochimaru hissed, lunging forward for the kill. "DIE!"

Sarutobi jumped back out of the way, reaching out to his Summons. "Enma!" he called. "Henge!"

"Understood!" The Monkey King vanished in a poof of smoke, replaced by a large nyoi-bo that flew into the old ninja's hands. Reacting quickly, he used it to block the Snake-sannin's attack.

Hissing in annoyance, the Snake-sannin turned to his blonde-haired slave, eyes light in fury. "Kill him!"
At his command, Minato surged forward, blocked from his target by the two Sarutobi clones.

"Forgive us, Minato," the first Sarutobi clone replied.

"But you give us no choice!" finished the other. It hands began rapidly flying through seals before raising a hand to its lips. "Katon: KARYUU ENDAN!"

The first clone's hands were also forming seals. "Katon: HOUSENKA NO JUTSU!"

At the sight of the two fire-style jutsu rushing towards him, the blonde Hokage halted in his tracks, forming signs at a rapid pace. "Doton: DOURYUHEKI!" A protective wall of solid rock rose up around him, shielding him from the bright, hot flames. Once the attacks ceased, he emerged from his protective cocoon in flash, rushing them head on.

"Minato, you must stop this!" Clone #1 exclaimed.

"You must break free from his control!" pleaded the other.

Their cries went unheeded. Reaching the first clone, the blonde ninja wiped it from existence without single shred of remorse - or any other emotion whatsoever.

Though still in his transformed state within Sarutobi's grip, Enma surveyed the other battle with a frustrated growl. "It's no use," he exclaimed, a single narrowed golden eye visible within the dark staff. "He can't hear you."

"He won't hear you," Orochimaru corrected, slashing at the bo staff with his blade. "All that makes up his soul now is the anger and bitterness born over years of wathcing the village he died to save spite his Legacy..."

"You leave that child out of this..." Sarutobi ground out, pushing back against the Sannin. "It does not concern--"

"You're wrong, Sensei!" the younger ninja corrected, grinning. "The child has everything to do with this!" He pulled back, swing his sword towards the old nin's side. Sarutobi jumped back, just barely avoiding the attack. The Sannin was not deterred. "In case you have forgotten," he continued. "It was Minato's soul that kept the Kyuubi's power at bay."

Sarutobi tensed, blocking another strike from the Kusanagi.

"How long will it be, I wonder?" the dark haired Sannin mused. "There's no way the brat can keep the beast contained for long..." He grinned maniacally. "Before you know it, we'll have not one, but two Bijuu rampaging across the country!"

"Two...?" Sarutobi's mind immediately went back to the last fight of the Chuunin Exam, and the strange behavior one of the fight's participants had displayed. "The Kazekage's youngest..."

"Very clever, ne, Sensei!" Orochimaru laughed. "Konoha is as good as finished!"

ooooo

Shikamaru stood tense on his tree branch, staring into the distance. According to Pakkun, the ninja that had been pursuing them had been rapidly gaining on them. It was only a matter of time before...
they reached him.

'And it's up to me to slow them down long enough for Naruto and Sakura to find Sasuke and stop him from getting himself killed by that crazy Sand kid,' His face set in a serious scowl, he paused before scratching at his chest with a load groan. "How troublesome..."

What was it about the Uchiha that people found so fascinating anyway? Sure, he was the number one rookie of their graduating class... but big deal! That by no means made him the smartest, or the strongest. He had possession of the Sharingan, it was true, but any Kekkei Genkai would be looked at as amazing if there was only one person able to truly master it. Then, of course, there was the whole 'striving to be the best at everything' bit he had going on. How could you be certain you were the best unless you went out and faced every other ninja in the world? Who wanted to waste time doing that? Certainly not Shikamaru.

Ever since he was younger, yet old enough to consider thoughts about his own future, Shikamaru had had a simple set of goals for himself that he wanted to accomplish. Being a Nara, it was without a doubt that he'd become a ninja, his father was a member of the renowned Ino-Shika-Cho after all, but he had no real desire to follow that closely in his footsteps. Assuming a relatively stress-free position as a Chuunin would be ideal for him, really. He'd marry, raise a few kids... live a simple, easy, stress-free existence until he retired - upon which time he could sit back, watching the clouds and playing shogi for as long as he pleased.

'Yet here I am, stuck in the middle of the forest, just *waiting* for a group of Jounin probably way out of my league,' He rolled his eyes at the ridiculousness of it all. What was the point to it all anyway? He didn't even like Sasuke! And while Sakura wasn't all that bad - when she wasn't in Fan Girl or Head Bashing mode - he didn't even know her!

'Guess that leaves Naruto...' Annoying as she could be at times, he couldn't very well allow her to sacrifice herself, could he? He chuckled. "No way a knucklehead like her would go quietly... Hokage this, and Hokage that..." Heck, she'd been spouting that dream of hers ever since she'd been younger, too, hadn't she?

oo Flashback oo

Though he by no means considered himself a master of stealth - being sneaky took way too much work, anyway - ditching school was always easy on days like this. Someone had set off some prank or another in the Teacher's lounge - something involving fireworks, he'd heard - and it had taken all the instructors on hand to undo the damage. Surely with all the adults in such a tizzy they'd fail to notice the absence of one small boy, who they'd last checked, had been sleeping in the back of the class.

It wasn't to say that Shikamaru hated learning, far from it in fact. Going to school, mostly waking up so early in the morning to sit and be lectured things that you already knew just seemed much too troublesome for the effort. If he'd really had any choice at all in the matter, he would much rather be spending his time cloud watching. It was with the intention of doing that just that that he had first come across her, er... him.

He'd been cutting across the Academy exercise yard - it was the fastest route that he knew of to his favorite cloud spot - when he spotted a small blonde sitting hunched over at the edge of the black top. At first he'd assumed the kid was sick or hurt, and was about to ask if they were all right - he was lazy, not heartless - when he realized the kid was scrawling something in the dirt with a small stick. Normally he wouldn't have dedicated any more attention to the situation, he
had some cloud gazing to do afterall, but curiosity got the better of him and he ventured forward to see what it was that was being written.

The writing was a little sloppy, as it usually tended to be with such rudimentary writing tools, but what he thought might just be random doodles turned out to be a rather well planned schematic for what Shikamaru assumed was some sort of catapult. If he was reading it properly, the device was to be set up in the classroom supply closet. The victim, who he assumed to be some teacher that had earned the blonde's disfavor, would open the classroom door, which would trigger the supply closet door - located across the room - to open up, activating the catapult to bombard them with whatever sticky/smelly/dirty substance the blonde happened to deem appropriate.

He smirked in amusement. Whoever this kid was, he certainly was clever. However, there was only one small problem... Shikamaru ventured closer, peering over the blonde's shoulder. "Your math's wrong."

The blonde tensed, whipping her head around to stare up at him. Realizing that he wasn't a teacher or some other adult, she relaxed, giving him a squinty eyed look. "What'd you say?"

"Your math," Shikamaru replied, his expression one of boredom. Why was he doing this anyway? It wasn't as if it really mattered, right? "You write here it's 15 feet from the supply closet to the classroom door," he explained. "But really that's the length of the classroom itself... If you don't get the right measurement, you'll end up overshooting your target."

The blonde blinked at him a few moments before staring down at her blueprint. "Huh..." she murmured, studying the diagram.

"Yeah," he grumbled. "And don't forget to take your catapult's load into account... the weight of it's gonna affect how far it goes."

"Oh, I know that," the blonde replied. She studied her diagram, smudging out a few numbers with a small finger before correcting a few calculations.

Shikamaru watched her, studying the work and nodding when he didn't find any discrepancies. Whoever this kid was, they were smart. 'I know he's at the Academy,' he mused to himself. 'He looks about my age, but he's not in any of my classes."

"There we go!" The blonde studied her handiwork with a beaming smile before smudging it out with a foot.

"What'd you do that for?" Shikamaru asked.

She blinked at him, tapping her head as she answered, "S'all up here now." A grin spread out across her face. "Thanks for the help."

"Whatever," He shrugged. The two stood in silence. "So... what'cha gonna load it with?"

If possible, her grin widened. "Fertilizer."

He blinked a little before laughing out loud. This kid was interesting! "What's your name?"

Turning to face him fully, the blonde puffed her chest proudly. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto!" she exclaimed. "The future Hokage!"
Smiling at the exuberance that the blonde displayed even to this day, Shikamaru wondered how she could remain so steadfast about a goal despite the odds stacked against her. He hadn't come across her again until she joined Iruka's class at the Academy a year or two later. He'd known the blonde was not the buffoon she made herself to be - no one could carry out such elaborate pranks and not have some shred of intelligence. Naruto's pranks, though they ranged from anything to buckets of water over doorways, to traps, to contraptions much like the one she'd created when they first met, were always creative and well thought out. She was no genius prodigy like the Uchiha, but he'd known she was definitely more than meets the eye...

If only he'd known how much.

'Uzumaki Naru...' he smirked thoughtfully. 'One of these days I'm gonna figure you out...' He trailed off, sensing the 8 chakra signatures almost directly on top of him. 'That is if I make it out of this, of course...'

An image of the blonde glaring up at him flashed through his mind briefly. "You better not die, Shikamaru!" He laughed, drawing his hands together for his family's Kagemane no Jutsu. He couldn't let himself die here! Knowing the blonde she'd find some way to bring him back and then kick his ass. 'And if she didn't, Ino certainly would!'

Making his escape through the Konoha forest, it was through years of intense training that allowed Kankuro to sense the upcoming attack at his back. With an unresponsive Gaara in tow, he leapt upwards several branches in the tree he had just landed in, narrowly avoiding the shuriken that imbedded themselves in the bark where he had just stood.

Sasuke touched down next to them, another kunai in hand ready to be thrown. The puppeteer inwardly frowned at the triumphant smirk on his face.

'He caught up so fast,' he thought to himself. 'But what the hell happened to Temari...?'

“You’ve gone far enough,” the Uchiha replied. “It’s time to stop running.”

The older boy straightened up, staring down at the Konoha genin with a scowl. “Why don’t you buzz off, kid.” he said with a scoff. “Can’t you see we’re not interested in playin’ with you right now?"

Dark eyes glanced at him briefly before falling on that of the redhead in his arms. Kankuro had to resist the urge to shield him from those eyes. It wasn’t as if they were remotely close – this was Gaara, after all.

"Is that so,” The dark haired genin paused. “Gaara?”

Kankuro tensed as the boy beside him shifted, raising his head with a maniacal smirk on his face. “Oh no…” He stepped away from his brother, his eyes wide and his steps unsteady; never a good sign. “I want to fight you... I want to feel the life drain out of you…""'

‘Damn it... he's really far gone…’ Although later he would realize how foolish an action this
turned out to be, Kankuro stepped forward to block the smaller boy’s path. “Gaara, we can’t,” he replied. “Don’t you remember the plan?”

The narrowing of pale green eyes was the only warning he received. “Get out of my way,” Gaara’s arm rose faster than Kankuro could track, slamming the older boy into a nearby tree.

Sasuke stared, stunned. Weren’t they supposed to be teammates?

_You don’t like your teammates any more than he does his_, a voice sneered.

_That’s not true…_ Another voice countered. _Isn’t it?_

Sasuke wasn’t sure.

Kankuro lay against the tree trunk, groaning in pain. Slipping quietly into unconsciousness, he slumped forwards and down towards the ground.

Approaching them in the distance, Temari’s eyes widened in horror as she watched her brother begin his descent towards the ground in the distance. “KANKURO!!” Quick to act, she drew her fan from her back and drew forth a large gust of wind. Rushing forward as quickly as her battered body would allow, she plucked him out of the air and pulled him to safety.

“Kankuro…” The boy groaned again, but did not respond. Biting her lip in frustration, the blonde turned her attention back to the two younger genin in the distance. ‘What the hell do we do now… Baki-sensei…’

Sasuke spared the two Suna siblings a glance before turning back to his opponent, only to have him chuckling in amusement. “Something funny?”

Gaara stared back at him, grinning sadistically. “Just envisioning your death…” he murmured. “Mother says it will be glorious… She hasn’t gotten to taste such wonderful blood in such a long time…” He closed his eyes briefly. “Isn’t that right, Mother…?”

“Mother…” The Uchiha tensed, staring downwards at the sand suddenly pooling around his feet. ‘This again…? I gotta take him out now!’ Wasting no time, Sasuke reached into his weapons pouch for two kunai. Attaching exploding tags to their ends, he hurled them at the Sand ninja with all his might.

Sand rising up around him like a curtain, the redhead only ground as the shock of the explosion was absorbed by his sand.

Gaara’s Ultimate Defense…

‘This again…’ Sasuke frowned in irritation. ‘Guess I got one chance at this…’ He thrust out his hand, drawing chakra into his open palm. Before long, the air was filled with the sound of chirping birds.

Temari’s eyes widened in recognition. ‘Oh no… that attack again…’

“CHIDORI!” The dark haired genin flew towards the redhead at top speeds, ripping up chunks of wood as he ran. At the last moment, he raised his arm, plunging it deep into the wall of sand.
Instead of the scream of pain that had followed like last time, there was only laughter. ‘Huh... what happened?’ Sasuke watched as the sand fell away, leaving what he assumed to be Gaara. The boy was still half covered in sand; however, it was if he had mutated into some creature... His eyes widened in confusion as he jumped back, landing a few trees away. ‘What the hell was this...?’

Gaara chuckled raspily, staring back at him with one green eye, and one gold. His mouth – maw might have been a more appropriate word considering a fangs now dripping with saliva that now reside in his mouth – quirked upwards into a sinister grin. “What’s wrong, Uchiha?” he asked. “Are you afraid of me?”

‘No...’ Several hundred yards away with her unconscious brother at her side, Temari trembled in fear. ‘He’s already begun the transformation...’ She clutched at Kankuro’s dark shirt. ‘We’re all gonna die...’

Rising out of his crouched position, Sasuke stared at the boy in front of him. When he had suspected something was wrong with him, he certainly had suspected... whatever this was.

The redhead continued to stare at him as a hawk would a field mouse. “Are you going to run away from me?” he asked. His amused grin morphed into a scowl. “Are you really that weak?”

Sasuke scowled.

~ “You are weak...” ~

~ “Run away... Foster your hatred... Cling to your pathetic life...” ~

‘I... am not weak...’ Sasuke stared at the boy in annoyance. Despite all of his training, everything he had thrown at the kid had been blocked by the damnable sand of his. Of all of his attacks, only one had seemed to do any lasting damage. Unfortunately, he could only use that attack a limited amount of times...

OO Flashback OO

“Good job, Sasuke...” Kakashi visible eye surveyed the damage done by Sasuke’s attack before crinkling in a grin. “You’ve gotten the hang of it now.”

Beside him, Sasuke smirked at his success. Still... “I wanna give it another go...” He ran through the required hands signs and thrust his hands out, pooling chakra into his palm. Nothing happened. “Wha...?”

“Hm... I suspected that would happen,” He glanced back at the Jounin in confusion. “This attack requires a lot of focus and a lot of chakra... and it appears two is your limit.”

He frowned at the thought. “What’s yours?”

The droopy eyed Jounin blinked. “Mine?” He paused, looking thoughtful. “Hm... I’d say about four...”

Four? Sasuke felt all those feelings of inadequacy rushing back towards him again. If only he could get just one more...

The Copy ninja seemed to be able to read his mind, for he soon replied, “Remember, Sasuke...
while this jutsu is an assassination technique, I only taught it to you to use for your protection, got it?”

_He was quiet a moment. “Got it,”_

“And also, don’t forget,” the Jounin continued. “Never try to force it. If you don’t have the chakra to pull it off, you could cause irreparable damage – or even kill yourself. And don’t even think of relying on that Curse Seal,” Sasuke tensed in surprise. “You have to remain in control of yourself at all times – or _it_ will control you.”

Resisting the urge to massage his neck, the young Uchiha stared down at his hands silently. They were shaking from the strain of his training. “So, two is my limit.” He glanced back up at his teacher. “What happens if I manage another?”

_If there was a word to describe that had passed over Kakashi’s eye briefly, Sasuke had never heard of it. The Jounin was silent a long time before he finally spoke. “You won’t.”_

OO End Flashback OO

Pushing the thought from his mind, Sasuke clenched his fists in frustration. He had used the Chidori the first time back in the arena, and then again just now. How was he supposed to beat Gaara without it?

He gazed at Gaara his words from before coming back to the surface. ‘_I refuse to be weak…’ _he thought to himself. ‘_I refuse to let myself be beaten…’ _He glared up at Gaara, watching as his face was replaced with that of his brother’s and then Naruto’s. “Not by you!” The anger and fury washed over him like a tidal wave, the familiar black marks of the Curse Seal appearing across his arms and face. Before he knew it, he was rushing towards the other genin, chakra crackling in his hand. “CHIDORI!”

Temari watched as the lightning based attack neared its target, only to fizzle out and fade into nothingness at the last moment. ‘_What….?!’_

Sasuke was just as surprised, his eyes wide in horror. He tried drawing chakra for an alternative attack, only to cry out as his body seized up in pain. "NO!"

Gaara laughed sinisterly, swatting him away with a sand covered arm. "Fool! I knew you were weak!

Ignoring the taste of copper on his lips, Sasuke struggled to pull himself to his feet. Unfortunately with each movement he made, the Curse Seal pulsed in tune, sending waves of pain rushing through his body.

~ "Weak..." ~

'No...'

~ "You are too weak..." ~

'I can't lose... I can't be defeated here...'

The redhead watched his struggling in the distance, his eyes glinting madly. He raised his sand-
arm once more, forming wicked-looking talons. His demon was crying out for Uchiha's blood to be spilled and Gaara was more than willing to comply. "DIE!"

"I don't think so!!" Suddenly, there was a flash of orange in Gaara's peripheral vision, followed shortly by pain as a sandaled foot collided with the side of his head. The force of the blow sent him hurtling backwards into the tree behind him.

In the distance, Temari stared in awe at the familiar blonde glaring at her younger brother fiercely from a nearby branch. The older girl thought she'd seen what the younger blonde was capable of during her two bouts in the exams, but for her to not only get the drop on Gaara, but his sand defense as well...? 'What exactly is this girl...?'

Touching down beside the fallen Uchiha, Sakura, too wondered about her fellow kunoichi. When they'd finally caught sight of their teammate being knocked back by Gaara, the pink haired kunoichi had feared the worst. However, Naruto had managed to put on an extra burst of speed, not to stop Sasuke from hitting the tree, but to knock back the Suna-nin with more force and aggression than Sakura could ever recall seeing her display.

'Naru-kun...' Beside her, the Uchiha groaned and once again tried to sit up. However, like all the times before his efforts were thwarted by another spasm of pain. Startled at the sight of her crush in such pain, Sakura knelt beside him, eyes shining in worry. "Sasuke-kun!" Green eyes took in the black marks streaking across his face and arms. 'Those marks again... Sasuke-kun... what have you done...?'

Pakkun studied the Uchiha, his furry brow creased in worry. Kakashi had warned the kid, hadn't he...? 'This is definitely not good...'

Naruto glanced back at her teammates briefly, trying to push down the apprehension she felt at the situation in general. Though she had no idea what was the cause of those marks on her teammate's body, she remembered how he had been the last time she saw them in the Forest of Death. She bit her lip worriedly, gazing back at the redhead in the distance. 'There's already one unstable ninja here to deal with.... we sure as hell don't need another...'

"Sakura-nee-chan," The pink-haired ninja glanced up at her, blinking in surprise at the no-nonsense tone in her voice. "Grab Sasuke and let's get the hell out of here!"

"No!" Sasuke ground out, clenching his teeth in pain. "I'm not going anywhere...!"

The blonde turned back to glare at him. "You idiot!" she snarled. "You're no match from him like this, can't you see that?"

He tensed angrily, looking up to glare at the blonde's back as she turned away once more.

~ "What's the matter, Sasuke? I thought you could fight your own battles?" ~

Feeling a sharp rush of anger accompanied by another spike of pain courtesy of the seal at his neck, the dark haired genin clenched his fists angrily, ignoring the feeling of his nails biting into his palms. 'Naruto...'

"You..." All three members of Team 7 looked up at the sound of Gaara's voice, watching as he slowly rose to his feet. His appearance had changed once more; his whole upper body was encased in sand, taking on the shape of a tanuki-like creature that smirked at them sadistically with sharp
teeth and golden eyes. Those eyes focused in on Naruto, narrowing in recognition. It took every
one of the blonde's will power not to look away. "I told you," he said raspily. "I'd kill you if you
got in my way again..."

Naruto twitched.

~ THIS BOY IS MENTALLY UNSTABLE. ~ the Kyuubi remarked dryly, shifting to the forefront
of her mind. While the notion of having another sentient presence in her head was still something
that didn't sit quite right with her, it was yet another thing involving the fox that had been filed
away under 'something to ask the Old Man about later'... that is, if they survived this.

'No shit, Kitsune!' she thought back, turning her attention back to Gaara with a frown. The
redheaded boy didn't seem at all deterred by the steely look in her eyes. In fact he seemed to be
relishing it. "You think I was just gonna stand by and let you kill my teammate?" she
snarled. "You've gotta be joking?"

"Why?" She blinked in surprise. Gaara smirked. "Why care for anyone other than
yourself? Personal attachments to others make you weak."

"I don't believe that," she countered.

His sandy maw shifted into a sinister sneer, as golden eyes moved from her to her teammates. "I'll
prove it to you."

Before Naruto could even ask what he meant, a sandy arm shot past her, followed shortly by its
owner, towards Sakura and Sasuke. She whirled around, eyes wide in
horror. "SAKURA! SASUKE!"

Seeing the attack rushing towards them, Sakura didn't waste any time. Jumping to her feet, she
whipped out a kunai and placed herself in front of Sasuke like a shield.

At the sight of the young kunoichi acting as a shield, Gaara's eyes widened as his mind was
bombarded by forgotten memories. Sakura's face was replaced by an older man with sandy blonde
hair and sad blue eyes. "Ya... Yashamaru..." Newfound anger blossomed within him once
more. How DARE they make him remember! With an enraged yell, he plowed forward and
snatched Sakura up out of her stance and slammed her into a nearby tree, pinning her there with his
sandy talons.

The pink haired kunoichi gave out a little strangled gasp before losing consciousness.

Naruto froze in shock, her eyes barely believing what had just happened. "NEECHAN!"

Gaara glanced back them, chuckling. "What will you do...?" he asked. "You know my power...
you know I can kill you... just as easily as I can crush her..." To prove his point, he tightened his
grip on Sakura just slightly, eliciting a whimper of pain.

"SAKURA!" Sasuke yelled, wincing in pain. She'd protected him, all the while knowing she
wouldn't be able to... 'Damn it... I can't move...'

The redhead ignored him, keeping his gaze on the blonde. He knew she was frightened; he could
smell it on her. His demon reveled in the scent. She knew what he was capable of - how quickly
he could kill a person, how easy it was for him - she'd seen him in action... "If you run away... she
dies... but if you stay and fight me..." He allowed some of his sand to fall away, separating his sand-arm from the giant hand still keeping Sakura pinned. He formed a new one in its place, point a clawed hand at the blonde. "You all die..."

Hidden in the trees, Pakkun shuddered in fear. He certainly didn't know the blonde very well, but if she was really a student of Kakashi's the odds of her fleeing and leaving her teammates behind were just as likely as him suddenly coughing up a hairball. He crouched down low on his haunches, wracking his brain for some course of action that would get them all out of this mess alive. So far he was coming up empty. 'Definitely, definitely not good.'

Oblivious to the little ninken, Gaara stared at the blonde. "Will you run away," he asked her. "Or will you stay and die... just like the others?"

Naruto stared back at him, umoving. "I won't,"

~ "I will neither run nor hide. Cuz that's my nindo!" ~

She gazed at Sakura, her unconscious face masked in pain.

~ "...Cuz Sakura-nee-chan's my rolemodel!" ~

Behind her she could hear Sasuke's gasping breaths, his struggles to contain his pain. 'Kakashi-sensei said "those who abandon their teammates are worse than trash"," she thought. 'I won't run and I won't die...' 'I'm not goin' anywhere!' She raised her hands, forming her oft-used cross seal. "KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!"

Three clones appeared beside her and together they all rushed towards Gaara, kunai poised to strike.

The Sand-nin blinked in surprise. She hadn't run away? Even though she knew she was going to die? He stared into her eyes, Yashamaru's face appearing unbidden once more. "NO!" he yelled, raising his arms to retaliate. "STAY AWAY FROM ME!!"

Quick to act, the three Naruto clones jumped in front of the original, taking the blow of the sand claws head on before poofing out of existence. Alone once more, blonde landed on another tree branch, scowling at her opponent once more. "Damn it... I've got to get past that sand of his... Or else..." Her eyes flickered to Sakura once more.

A slight shifting in her mind signaled the fox's presence once more. ~ HE HAS A WEAK SPOT... ~ that silky voice intoned.

She scowled at the 'I know something you don't' tone in his voice, stamping down her pride before responding, 'And that would be...?'

There was silence for a moment. ~ SURELY YOU DON'T EXPECT THE INFORMATION FOR FREE? ~

A scowl made its way to the blonde's face. 'Well, forgive me if I sound rude,' she replied. 'but just because I'm young, doesn't mean I'm stupid. I know what you are and I'm not about to make it a habit of forming deals with you. You owe me chakra, so don't expect any favors in return!'

The fox laughed, and had it been anywhere other than inside her mind, Naruto imagined the sound
would have made her ears ring.  ~ **WHAT A SHARP-TONGUED WELP YOU ARE! YOU MAY THINK I OWE YOU... BUT DON'T EXPECT ME TO GIVE MY CHAKRA OR MY KNOWLEDGE SO FREELY... ESPECIALLY IF I CAN AVOID DOING SO... ~**

'Well, guess what, Fox? You can't!' Naruto shot back.  'Consider giving them beneficial to your wellbeing.'

~ **EMPTY THREATS.** ~ the youkai sniffed.  ~ **DO AS THE OTHER WELP SUGGESTS AND WE SHALL NO LONGER BE IN ANY DANGER. ~**

Naruto twitched in anger, wishing - not for the first time - that the Kyuubi had a neck ( one that was solid and small enough ) for her to strangle.  'You think what you want, fox, but all that's about to change real fast!' Once again she stood directly in front of the Kyuubi no Youko's cage, glaring upwards at the fox with eyes of blue steel.  'I am NOT going to leave my friends to die!' She pointed upwards to the tattered remains of the paper seal.  'You don't like it, there's there door!'

Save for the dripping of water somewhere in the distance, the large chamber was strangely silent.

The blonde stared into the darkness of the cell, daring the fox to respond.  'Well?!

oooo

Gaara stared at the small blonde in the distance, standing still on a tree branch with an intense look upon her face.

"What is she doing?" Temari wondered aloud.  "Why is she just standing there?"

Sasuke's gaze went from his teammate to Gaara, his eyes widening when the redhead took it upon himself to make the first move.  "Naruto! Get out of there, you idiot!"

Even as he yelled, the blonde was already in action, a kunai in hand as she rushed forward.  "All right, Creepy Eyes," she yelled.  "This is it!"

Gaara laughed.  "Ready to die so soon?"  He lashed out at her with an arm of sand.  "So be it!"

Pakkun clapped his paws over his eyes.  "I can't watch!"

"KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!" Two clones appeared above Naruto as she surged forward, grasping her arms and yanking her safely out of Gaara's reach.  Smirking, Naruto drew her hands into a cross seal once more.  "Again! KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!"  Two more clones appeared beneath her this time, and she used them as a spring board in absence of a tree branch.  "And one. More. Time - KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!"  Using the clone as a stepping stone, the blonde jumped upwards into the air.  'Gotcha now, ya creepy bastard...' "And now, from the tutelage of Kakashi-sensei..." Flipping up and over Gaara's head, she landed on the tree branch behind him, kunai drawn and ready.  "Konohagakure Hiden: Taijutsu no Ougi," She brought the blade upwards, sinking it in for the kill.  "SENNEN GOROSHI!!"

All those present watched with bated breath only to stare as Naruto rammed her kunai into the other nin's backside.  Gaara turned his head to stare back at the blonde - whose expression could only be described as complete and utter embarrassment - before swatting her away with his heavy tail.
As she was backwards through the air, Naruto raised her hand, pointing her at him as fox grin stole across her face. "Bang,"

The exploding tag that had been wrapped securely around her kunai fizzled and popped as it activate before erupting in a deafening explosion. Sand and sawdust flew everywhere.

Within the confines of its cell, the Kyuubi chuckled deeply. ~ NICELY DONE, ~ it murmured, impressed. ~ VERY NICELY DONE. PERHAPS YOU ARE WORTHY OF THAT PRANKSTER TITLE AFTER ALL... ~

Smirking inwardly, Naruto replied, 'Coming from you, that means... absolutely squat.' She hurtled backwards towards another tree, prepared to collide with unyielding bark. Instead, however, she crashed into Sasuke - the young Uchiha having at the last minute placed himself between her and the tree, taking the brunt of damage. The two Leaf genin fell against the tree branch in a tangle of limbs, groaning in pain.

Recovering first - mostly from shock than any injury - Naruto gazed down at the other genin in confusion. Had he actually tried to help her? "Sasuke...?"

He raised his head, his pain evident despite the annoyed expression on his face. "All that work..." he breathed. "And that's... the best you could come up with?"

Her face flushing in embarrassment, she whipped her face away, sulking angrily. "Shaddup, asshole!!"

Struggling slowly to his feet, Gaara stared at the blonde in surprise. Though the sand had absorbed most of the shock from the explosion, the Suna ninja was struggling to get it to maintain its shape. Somehow that small slip of a girl had known exactly where and how to hit him to cause considerable damage. 'This girl...' he marveled for what seemed like the thousandth time since meeting her. 'Just who is she...?'

~ DOES IT MATTER? ~ his demon countered, clawing viciously on what little control he had over himself. ~ SHE'S WEAKER THAN US. WE'LL KILL HER AND ALL THE OTHERS. THAT IS OUR PURPOSE, REMEMBER? ~

'That's right...' Gaara straightened his back, drawing his sand around him once more in a tanuki-like form. 'We will not cease to exist...' His eyes narrowed as he glared at the blonde angrily. "Make no mistake," he vowed. "I will kill you."

From his reclined position, Sasuke scowled darkly. "You pissed him off," he remarked dryly. If Naruto noticed the underlying worry in his tone, she did a remarkable job of ignoring it. "Well, he'll just hafta deal with it." She rose to her feet, wincing slightly.

The Uchiha's eyes caught the movement, causing him to frown slightly. 'She's hurt...' he thought to himself. 'Probably from that blow with the tail...' He studied the blonde's face and the fierce determination in her eyes. How long will she be able to hold out on her own? His frown deepening, he forced himself to his feet. "Naruto..."

The blonde blinked as he walked forward and stood in front of her. "Sasuke...?"
"Find a way to save, Sakura." Dark eyes flickered over to the third member of Team 7 before falling back on Gaara once more. "I won't forgive you if you let her die."

Naruto's eyes widened in surprise before narrowing once again in anger. "What the hell do you think I'm tryin' to do, you--" She paused when his words caught up to her brain. There was something about his tone... "What're you planning to do?"

Sasuke didn't look back. "I'll hold him off for as long as it takes you to free Sakura and get the hell out of here."

"I'm not leaving you behind!" she exclaimed. "Are you crazy?!"

"Maybe," Naruto hadn't been expecting an answer like that; she blinked in confusion. Sasuke smirked. "When Itachi slaughtered our clan... he took away everyone I ever held dear... I was too weak - too scared to stop him."

"Sasuke..." Her voice was softer than he ever recalled hearing it.

"I've trained so hard since that day... it's been my goal to track him down and kill him..." He paused, staring upwards into the forest canopy. "But if I die here... that just means that this is as far as I was meant to go."

"That's crap!" Naruto exclaimed, taking a few steps forward to stand beside him. "We're not gonna die here - I won't let that happen!"

Sasuke stared at her a few moments, thinking back to their mission in Nami no Kuni. The words the blonde had spoken to him during their fight with Haku, echoed loudly in his mind...

~ "I don't abandon my teammates and certainly not my friends! So shut up 'cuz you're stuck with me!" ~

He smirked inwardly before staring ahead once more. "The way I felt that day, the day my family was murdered... I don't ever want to feel that way again." He clenched his fists at his side. "I don't want any more of my precious people to die."

Blue eyes widened in surprise. 'Sasuke...?' Despite being injured, the will and determination exuded by her teammate struck a chord in Naruto. She found her mind also going back to the mission in Wave, the righteous anger she had felt at the sight of a comrade in danger... and the rage at what she thought to be his death... 'You sacrificed yourself for me that day... and told me not to die...' she remembered. 'And I avenged you...' Haku's face flashed before her eyes, as well as his final moments. 'Even though he was hurt... he found the strength to act when Zabuza was in danger... And...' Her eyes dimmed slightly in remembrance. 'He died protecting someone precious to him... that was the purpose he decided for himself...'

Gazing at Sasuke's back, Naruto realized that it was the same. 'You're willing to give up your goal if it means saving Sakura...'

~ "The more he pushed himself harder and pushed others away... the harder we tried... to get through his wall..." ~

~ "My body moved on its own..." ~
“But... I know there’s more to him than that. He acts so cold, but I’ve seen moments where he was gentler... kinder...”

"I told you I don't abandon my teammates! And certainly not my friends! So just shut up cuz you're stuck with me!"

"I know..."

"But... we have to look out for each other... all three of us."

"No matter what... don't die... don't you die... Naru...to..."

“We of Team 7 don’t abandon our teammates.”

“Or our friends,”

Having closed her eyes sometime during the sudden onslaught of memories, Naruto reopened blue orbs bright and intense with a new surge of determination. Everything seemed to make so much more sense to her now. She took a deep breath, raising her hands together in the seal for molding chakra. "I won't give up," she promised softly. Sasuke glanced back at her confusion. "So long as I have people to protect, I WON'T DIE!" Chakra flared up around her, encasing her body in a fight blue aura. "TAJJUU! KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!"
Chapter 19: Precious People

Chapter Summary

"You'll find nothin' is impossible when my family's in danger!"

Chapter 19

Back in Stadium, chaos still reigned as Kohona's ninja battled against the enemy ninja that had been hidden amongst them. Situated near the center stage, Kurenai glanced up at Asuma as he made quick work of the Suna ninja that had fallen under one of her genjutsu. Her witty comment was held back by the troubled expression on his usually laidback face.

"Your kids all right?" she asked, putting her back to his in preparation for the next round of attackers.

"Ino and Chouji are in the stands with Gai's student," he answered, his eyes scanning the chaotic stadium. "But there's no sign of Shikamaru. I know he's lazy as hell, but it's not like him to turn tail..."

The genjutsu specialist behind him nodded in agreement. Although her knowledge of Team 10 extended only so far as what their instructor had told her, she too agreed it was unlike the Nara boy to run away. Lay low until he could come up with a plan to handle the situation, maybe, but this...?

A Sound ninja rushed towards them, only to be caught in the back by a kunai. With a strangled gurgle he dropped to the ground, revealing a young Leaf Jounin with dark hair and sunglasses. He nodded to them briefly before running his hands through the signs of a Katon jutsu.

"Aoba-san," Kurenai called. "Asuma's lost one of his students. The Nara boy, Shikamaru."

Satisfied his attack had done a significant amount of damage, he turned to them with a grin. "Went up against that Fan Girl, ne?" The kunoichi nodded. "He left with the Uzumaki kid and her team mate. Kakashi sent them off."

On a mission? The other two jounin blinked in confusion. "Why?"

"To stop the Uchiha kid from going after the Suna team," Aoba explained. "Somethin's definitely off about that kid, I'm tellling ya'."

Neither Asuma or Kurenai bothered to ask him who he was referring to.

"Somebody ought to go after them, though, right?" he continued. "I mean, the village's gotta be crawling with Oto and Suna ninja by now... Three genin up against an enemy Jounin squad? Not very good odds - no matter how talented they might be."

Kurenai nodded absently in agreement, her mind reeling. What was Kakashi thinking? What was the Uchiha thinking for that matter? The Chuunin exams ended the moment that genjutsu was cast
over the stadium; didn't he realize they were at war?

"Well, guess there's nothing for it..." Asuma checked his weapons' pouch before glancing back at Kurenai. "Think you can handle yourself alone for a bit?"

She paused, giving him a look. "I was just about to ask you the same thing." He grinned impishly. "They've already got a lot of distance on you... how are you going to find them?"

All three ninja tensed when another ninja jumped down in front of them. However, they relaxed instantly when they realized it was one of their own.

Straightening his back, Aburame Shino raised a hand to his face, adjusting his sunglasses slightly. "I believe I can be of assistance."

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All those present in the area stared at the blonde in the distance, surrounded in a hazy blue glow. Her hair whipped around her face, and her eyes - sharp as steel - bored deep into Gaara's empty eyes. Before anyone could question what she was doing, she raised her hands into that familiar and often-used hand sign.

"TAJUU! KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!"

Chakra exploded across the forest canopy like a short pulse, and soon after the area was filled with hundreds of blonde-haired, orange-clad clones.

"N... no way..." Temari gasped.

The Uchiha stared in muted shock.

"Impossible..." Gaara exclaimed. "No one can create that many Shadow clones!"

All the blondes allowed varying smirks to spread across their faces. "You'll find nothin' is impossible when my family's in danger!"

Both Sasuke and the redhead blinked in surprise. 'Family...?'

"Get ready, Gaara!" The original Naruto stepped forward, fists clenched tightly in anticipation for the fight sure to come. Several of her clones mimicked the motion, still grinning mischievously. "'Cuz you're gonna regret the day you EVER messed with Team 7!" She turned to glance at the several dozen clones surrounding her in the tree. "Ready?"

"READY!" they chorused. Without warning, they all surged forward, converging on their enemy with arms raised to strike.

The Suna ninja stared at the orange tidal wave rushing down towards him. 'There's... so many...!' Before he could raise his sand in defense, several fists crashed into his body, knocking him backwards.

"U!"

'How...?!' Sand trailed behind him in a stream, unable to properly maintain its form beneath each
thundering blow.

Numerous feet slammed into his back, hurtling him forwards. "ZU!" Then further upwards into the air. "MA!"

Dozens of hands grabbed his feet, spinning him around into the clenched fists of dozens more. "KI!"

"How is this possible...?" Gaara watched in morbid fascination as hundreds of fists rambled into his sand body, propelling him through the tree branch beneath him towards the unyielding forest floor. He stared at the many numerous faces, maddening fury surging through him. He remembered the same face staring back at him from the hospital room, face drawn and pale with eyes wide in terror. How was it that that same face, that same girl could be overpowering him now?

~ HER DEMON IS NOTHING COMPARED TO US! ~ His demon railed. ~ SHE IS WEAK! SHE IS NOTHING! KILL HER!! WE CANNOT BE BEATEN BY THIS SNIVELLING CREATURE! KILL HER! KILL HERRRR!! ~

'I won't be beaten...' Gaara's heart began beating faster as he slowly allowed his demon more control. 'I will not disappear...' His anger fueled its influence and he could feel the youki rushing more strongly through his body than ever before. "NOT BY A GIRL LIKE HER!!!"

There was a second explosion of chakra. Smoke and sand rushed everywhere and kage bunshin where poofed out of existence by the blast. Knocked back by the shockwave, Naruto's back hit hard bark just as a large sand creature broke through the canopy, trees falling away beneath its massive weight.

"NO!" Temari's eyes were wide in terror at the large sand-shaped tanuki looming over the tree line. "He's finally done it... he's transformed!"

Sasuke's expression was similar to the Suna Kunoichi's. 'Is *that* what I was fighting...??' He felt a sharp surge of panic for the small blonde on the other side of the monster. 'Naruto, you don't stand a chance against that thing!'

Naruto stared up at Gaara's new form, her expression a mixture of awe and horror. 'What is that thing...??'

~ SHUKAKU THE ICHIBI, ~ the Kyuubi spat in distaste. ~ HE IS A SAND SPIRIT WHO FASHIONS HIMSELF A TRICKSTER... ~ the kitsune's tone turned smug in amusement. ~ BUT HOW CLEVER CAN ONE BE WHEN THEY MANAGE TO GET THEMSELVES SEALED INSIDE AN OLD POT... ~

Naruto inwardly rolled her eyes. 'Do you really have room to talk?'

The Kyuubi paused a moment, as if affronted before muttering, ~ SHUKAKU LACKS STYLE... AND HIS HOST STRENGTH OF WILL, ~

'Strength of will...?" The blonde blinked. 'You mean willpower?'

The Kyuubi mentally shrugged. ~ HOW ELSE DID YOU MANAGE TO MAINTAIN
CONTROL FOR SO LONG? ~

Naruto was at a loss for words.

As if he knew he were the subject of her thoughts, Shukaku-Gaara turned his head towards her, large golden eyes narrowing in amusement. He raised an arm, creating a gust a wind sent her flying backwards into yet another tree trunk.

Biting her lip to hold back a cry of pain, Naruto chose to curse inwardly instead. *That transformation of his has made him even stronger than before....!* She clenched her fist at her side in frustration. "How am I supposed to take this guy out when he can just knock me away like a fly on his back!" She thought of Sakura, pinned helplessly against a tree, the life slowly being squeezed out of her. She also thought of Sasuke, paralyzed with pain and covered in those strange and foreboding dark marks. She couldn't let either of them down - especially when they were both counting on her. She had to do something, and fast!

Her brain rattled through a few solutions before finally settling on one she hoped would be the most effective. Raising her hands, she bit her finger hard enough to draw blood. Coating her finger tips, she began running through the necessary signs. Inu... saru... tori... o-hitsuji...

In the distance, Temari's eyes widened in recognition. *'No way....!* she awed. *Is she really going to....?*

Unaware of her scrutiny, Naruto slammed her palm to the bark, vanishing behind a large cloud of smoke as she cried out, "KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU!" She waited with baited breath as the smoke cleared, only to gape at what her Summoning had produced.

Temari, Sasuke, and Pakkun sported similar expressions.

At the blonde's feet sat a small, red toad with blue strips running up and down its body. Glancing up at her, it raised a webbed arm in greeting. "Yo!"

Naruto's eyes lit up. "Ah! Too cute!"

There was a long stretch of silence.

After analyzing her reaction in her head, she quickly came to the realization that perhaps adoration was not the proper reaction given their current situation. A little embarrassed, she blushed, laughing nervously.

'Moron...' Both Temari and Sasuke thought in unison.

Unaware of their thoughts, the little toad blushed at the accidental compliment. "You're not too bad lookin' yourself, Neechan," it replied. "Your name would be...?"

"Er... Uzumaki Naru."

The little amphibian's dark eyes lit up in recognition at the name. "Ah, the new Summoner, right?" it mused. "Well, Gamakichi's the name. You got a message you need delivered, I'm the frog for the job!"

Naruto scratched her head absently, acutely aware of the large sand demon sitting watching them
with its tail thumping back and forth idly. It reminded her of a cat watching a mouse hole. "Um, that's great," she replied. "But what I really need right now is back up,"

Gamakichi glanced around her at Shukaku-Gaara, grimacing slightly. "Sorry, Neechan, I'm a lover, not a fighter."

"Right..." She laughed nervously once more, only to tense up when she sensed the oncoming assault. Quick to react, she grasped Gamakichi and curled in on herself, shielding his body with hers. Condensed balls of sand hit her head on with all the force of a spray of bullets, knocking her off of her feet once more.

Gamakichi's eyes widened in surprise, more at her selflessness than the actual attack. He may have been young, but Summons were supposed to help the Summoner, right? "Neecha--"

"Stay still!" the blonde snapped, her face a mask of pain.

Shukaku-Gaara snarled in rage, furious at the fact that his prey was still amongst the living. How dare she defy him by surviving?! "Just die already!" he screamed, raising a clawed hand into the air.

Naruto let out a sharp gasp as the leftover sand from Gaara's attacked collected together, pooling around her feet and rising up her legs. 'Just like with Lee...!' Reacting quickly, she drew a kunai from her weapons' pouch only to have sand to latch around her wrist, squeezing tightly enough to cause her to drop the blade with a yelp of pain. Before she knew it, she was pinned against the tree trunk, the deadly sand slowly inching its way up the rest of her body.

Shukaku-Gaara continued his work, grinning sadistically. "Are you scared of me now... Uzumaki Naruto...?"

He tightened his hold and she let out an involuntary cry of pain.

"NARUTO!" Sasuke tried to rise to his feet once more, only to be racked with another rush of pain. The seizure passed as quickly as it had come, causing him to collapse once more in exhaustion and frustration. "I can't move..." he groaned. "I can't... I can't do anything!" She was all alone against that... thing... and he couldn't even lift a finger to help her! Biting his lip against the strange feeling welling up in his chest, Sasuke clenched his fists, his nails digging harshly into the wood beneath him. "Damn it...!"

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"Neechan..." Naruto looked up at the little toad that had perched itself on top of her head, looking down at her worriedly.

"You should get out of here, Gamakichi..." she cautioned. "I don't want you to get hurt..."

"I should say the same for you, Neechan," the frog replied.

The blonde managed a wry grin. "Don't you worry... I'll be just fine..." Raising her free hand, she wiped a bit of blood from the corner of her mouth before bringing it down to her captive hand. Struggling slowly to make handsigns once more, she drew as much chakra as she could in preparation before once again crying out, "KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU!!"
The sand surrounding blew away, and Naruto was once again surrounding in smoke. However, this time the smokescreen covered far more area than before, and trees once again were felled under the weight of a large creature that appeared out of nowhere. After a few tense moments, a wind blew across the forest, clearing the smoke and revealing the largest toad any of them had ever laid eyes upon.

Recognizing the Summon instantly, Pakkun nodded his head, clearly impressed. "Nice..." he muttered.

Sasuke stared, slack-jawed, unable to process what he was seeing. Had Naruto... summoned *that* as well?

Naruto stared down at the battle-scarred head beneath her, a pleased grin threatening to split her face in two. "Gamabunta-jiisama!" she crowed.

A large yellow eye rolled upwards, falling upon her in recognition. "EH...? YOU AGAIN, HUH? WHAT DO YOU WANT NOW?"

"I need your help!" she exclaimed. "Against that guy!" She pointed to Shukaku-Gaara, leering at them in the distance.

Gamabunta's eyes narrowed in recognition. "SHUKAKU..." he grumbled in distaste. "THE ONE-TAILED..."

"So you know him?"

The old frog snorted, expelling a large cloud of smoke from his ever-present pipe. "I'VE TANGLED WITH A FEW BIJUU IN MY DAY..."

"So you'll help me?" the blonde asked hopefully.

Smoke filled the air as the Boss Toad took a drag from his pipe, his expression contemplative. After a few moments of silence he answered simply, "NO,"

Naruto's reaction was predictable. "WHAAAAAA???!"

Sasuke let out a groan.

"Whaddya mean 'no'?! Just like that? Really? After all the *trouble* I went through just to summon you - this being the *second* time, mind you - and you still don't think I'm worthy enough to be your subordinate! I thought we had a deal, Old man!"

Gamabunta snorted in mild annoyance. "I KNOW YOU WERE THE ONE THAT SUMMONED ME," he replied. "YOUR NAME'S ON THE CONTRACT, AFTER ALL. HOWEVER, THERE IS STILL ONCE THING YOU MUST DO TO SEAL THE DEAL."

"Of course... isn't that always the way?" Naruto growled to herself. "Ojii-sama, your timing is terrible!" Letting out a deep breath, she stared down at him entreatingly. "What do I hafta do?"

"WHY, IT'S SIMPLE," the old frog exclaimed. "YOU HAVE ONLY TO JOIN ME OVER A
DRINK OF SAKE, AND THE CONTRACT WILL BE COMPLETE."

The young kunoichi stared at him a few moments before letting out another yelp of indignation. "SAKE?! I'm only 12, for Kami's sake - I'm not old enough to drink!"

On her head, Gamakichi nodded in agreement. "She's got a point," he conceded. "And you gotta admit, this ain't the time or the place for a little social drinking... right, Oyaji?"

"Oyaji...?" Naruto blinked upwards at the little frog. "You mean he's your dad?

Gamabunta looked upwards once more, focusing in on the smaller toad peeking out from the blonde's messy locks. "GAMAKICHI... WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP THERE...?"

"Neechan here rescued me," the little frog replied. "That creepy sand kid tried to kill me! She saved my life!"

The Toad Boss blew out another gust of smoke, yellow eyes narrowing on the Jinchuuriki in the distance. "IS THAT SO...?"

Gamakichi nodded. "She's a good kid. You should help her out.

Inhaling smoke from his pipe, Gamabunta considered a few moments before nodding decidedly. "VERY WELL," he replied.

"Ah! Really?" The blonde's blue eyes lit up and joy and relief. Without a second thought, she snatched Gamakichi off the top of her head, engulfing him in a grateful hug. "Gamakichi-kun, you rock!" she exclaimed joyfully.

Pinned against her chest, the little frog blushed in embarrassment before slipping out of her grasp to resume his perch on her head once more. In attempts to regain his dignity, he gave a decisive nod as if her statement should have been obvious. "Of course I do," he said stately, earning a giggle.

"ALL RIGHT, YOU TWO..." Gamabunta shifted as he reached down to draw a long tanto from a belt at his side. "GET READY!"

Naruto quickly channeled chakra to her feet to allow her to stick to the large frog's head.

"HERE WE GO!" Powerful leg muscles tensing and then springing loose like a tightly wound coil, Gamabunta shot off towards the Shukaku like a bullet. Drawing his blade high, he rammed into the Bijuu from the side, rending his arm from his shoulder. The heavy appendage fell to the earth with a deafening crash, flattening trees and wildlife before dissolving back into sand once more.

"Whaa... that's amazing...!" Naruto cheered. "Way to go, Ojiisama!"

Gamabunta only grunted. "THAT WAS HARDER THAN IT LOOKED." He frowned slightly at the blonde's puzzled exclamation. "THE SAND WAS SO DENSE, I ALMOST WASN'T ABLE TO CUT THROUGH IT."

Unperturbed by the loss of its arm, Shukaku-Gaara only chuckled sinisterly at the other's
consternation. "Is that all you've got, Uzumaki Naruto?" he jeered. "I thought you were going to play with me!"

Naruto only scowled back at him.

"That's all right," Gaara continued on. "I suppose it's up to me then, to make things more interesting."

The Toad Boss's eyes narrowed. "BRACE YOURSELVES," he murmured.

"Huh?"

The sand creature shifted, a pillar of sand rising out of its forehead that eventually took on the shape of Gaara's upper body. Sparing them a sinister grin, the boy raised his hands together in a single hand sign before slumping over, unconscious.

"What's he doing?" the blonde blinked in confusion.

Temari's entire body shook. "He's actually doing it..." she gasped. "He's going to release it!" Wasting no time, she grasped Kankuro's arm and draped it over her shoulder. Drawing upon what chakra she had left, she bounded off into the trees as fast as she could. "We have to get out of here!"

Left alone with the unstable Jinchuuriki, Gamabunta watched the large amounts of youki seeping out of the creature's false body. He, like Temari, knew exactly what the red head had planned and he knew it wasn't going to be pretty. "THAT BOY..." he muttered in annoyance. "IS RELINQUISHING CONTROL TO HIS DEMON."

Naruto balked at him. "He can do that?"

Black and gold eyes flashed with life, and the tanuki-like creature threw its head back with a loud, maniacal laugh. ~ FREEEEE! FINALLY I'M FREEEEE! ~

"APPARENTLY," the toad answered wryly. "IT COMES AS NO SURPRISE GIVEN THE MANNER IN WHICH HE WAS SEALED."

"Meaning...?"

"SHUKAKU HAD BEEN SEALED BY SUNAGAKURE PRIESTS CENTURIES AGO, BUT IT WAS ONLY 12 YEARS AGO THAT HE WAS PLACED WITHIN THAT BOY." Gamabunta explained. "BECAUSE THEY WANTED TO USE THE DEMON'S POWER AS A WEAPON, THEY TOOK NO TIME TO CONSTRUCT SAFEGUARDS TO PROTECT HIM THE WAY YOUR HOKAGE DID... THAT FACT COUPLED WITH THE TREATMENT HE RECEIVED HAS NO DOUBT CAUSED HIM TO BECOME UNSTABLE..."

The blonde paused thoughtfully, thinking back on their 'conversation' in Lee's hospital room.

~ "Because I failed the one purpose for which I was created, I used to ask myself... Why do I exist?" ~
She remembered those empty eyes, filled only with killing intent. ~ *I will kill everyone else other than me... only then will I be able to prove my own existence.* ~

"He's not gonna kill anybody... I won't let him!" She stared down at the large orange frog beneath her feet. "We gotta stop him somehow, Ojiisama!" she exclaimed. "Suggestions?"

"THE LONGER THE SHUKAKU MAINTAINS CONTROL, THE STRONGER HE GETS..." Gamabunta answered sagely. "YOU HAVE TO WAKE UP THE MEDIUM..."

Medium... Naruto stared at Gaara, slumped over and dangingly lifelessly from the creature's forehead. "How...?"

"Prob'ly a punch or kick might do the trick," Gamakichi offered.

"Punch or kick... Got it." The Shukaku let out another insane bout of laughter, causing Naruto to cringe slightly. "A little over the top, isn't he?"

~ *SHUKAKU HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN ECCENTRIC ONE...* ~ the Kyuubi responded, its tone of one unimpressed. ~ *THE HOMICIDAL ONES USUALLY ARE.* ~

The blonde frowned inwardly. 'And that makes you...?'

The Kyuubi was silent for several moments. ~ *I BELIEVE THAT IS A CONVERSATION FOR ANOTHER TIME.* ~

Rolling her eyes at her tenant's flippant tone, Naruto found herself wondering what it must be like housing a demon for Gaara. She'd only known the truth of what she was for little under a year, but him...?

~ "I was created to be a weapon, a protector of my village...But for as long as I can remember I have been feared by everyone." ~

~ "Because I failed the one purpose for which I was created, I used to ask myself... ‘Why do I exist?’” ~

~ “I could find no reason so I came up with one of my own... I live for only myself. I love only myself. I will kill everyone else other than me... only then will I be able to prove my own existence.” ~

The other boy's words had frightened her right down to her very core. Not because they were a testament to how truly insane he actually was, but because they hit far closer to home than Naruto could ever remotely feel comfortable with. He'd been altered at birth, changed into something people hated and feared. All of his life he had been mistreated and shunned by all those around him, never knowing a single bit of kindness. All because of what he was...

Naruto knew what that was like. She had been down that road herself. No one to care for, no reason to continue living...? To go through life with no reason for existing...?

To once again come across someone who knew that same pain. Was still experiencing that same pain... It was all so very familiar...
"...I cannot continue on knowing that I have failed the most important person in my life..."

Kind, but sad, brown eyes flashed in her mind's eye and Naruto felt a familiar twinge of pain.

He had been like her - to extent. He'd had known isolation, and like her had found someone who showed her kindness despite what she was.

"He acknowledged you... gave you a purpose..."

'Hokage-jiji... Iruka-sensei... Ha... Haku...'

"I vowed that I would do whatever I could to repay him... He was my one and only precious person... Until I met you."

Beneath all her fear, pain, and anxiety, Naruto felt a stab of pity for the other boy. 'Gaara...'. He had gone through all the struggles she had gone through. And though he still had his family, it hadn't made one bit of difference. To them he was still something to be feared. 'His life had no purpose... so he tried to come up with one his own so he could keep going...'. She frowned when she replayed it back in her head. 'But *that's* what he came up with...?!'

"Why do I exist?"

How many times had she asked herself that same question years ago? At that thought her eyes widened in horror. 'He really is me...' she thought to herself. 'He's what I could've been... what I would've become If I hadn't found any precious people...'

"I live for only myself. I love only myself. I will kill everyone else other than me... only then will I be able to prove my own existence."

She brought a hand to her chest, clutching the material of her orange jacket in a white-knuckled grip. 'That's why I was so scared of him...'. She remembered really looking into his eyes during the first round of Preliminaries. It wasn't so much that she had looked into his eyes and saw nothing in their depths, but that she'd seen that same expression reflecting back at her many times before. 'To live life without a purpose... I won't let that be me... Never again...'

"Neechan...?" Gamakichi called worriedly.

Releasing her grip on her clothing, Naruto took a deep breath before staring downwards at the Frog Boss once more. "Gamabunta-jiisama," she called out. "Let's go!"

"BOUT TIME!" The toad bellowed. Wasting no time, he sprung forward on powerful legs, his target the tanuki in the distance.

Shukaku merely sneered at their approach, tail still flapping lazily to and fro. ~ YOU THINK I'M AFRAID OF YOU? ~ It raised its arm and shot it out towards him, claws brandished to rend them limb from limb.

Gamabunta deftly avoided the prolonged arm, springing back towards Shukaku before plowing heavily into its side.

"Go for it, Neechan!" Gamakichi called.
Gaara was now closer than ever before, but there was still a great distance between the two titans. One wrong move and she'd go plummeting to her death. "It's too far to jump!" she exclaimed. "Ojiisama, ya gotta hold him stil for me!"

The old toad pushed against the sand body, jockeying for a dominant position in their struggle. "IT'S NO GOOD," he grunted. "I AIN'T BUILT FOR THIS SORT OF THING!" As if to illustrate his point, his webbed hands kept slipping loose from Shukaku's body. "I GOT NO FANGS OR CLAWS!"

"Maybe if you use a Henge?" Gamakichi suggested.

"YOU KNOW I'M NO GOOD AT THOSE," the older frog countered with a groan. The Shukaku let out a snarling hiss as it tried to bat him away with its tail. Gamabuta jumped back at the last second, narrowly avoiding the blow. As he touched down on the ground, the trees shook with a loud groan, some even toppling to the ground under the Summon's massive weight.

"Hey, hey, careful, Ojiisama!" the blonde exclaimed. "You gotta keep the fight away from my teammates! I don't wanna squish them!"

"I KNOW, I KNOW--" Gamabunta paused, raising yellow eyes to focus on her. "HEY, KID... YOU'RE GOOD AT HENGE, AIN'CHA?"

She blinked. "Yeah... but how'd you--?"

"USE YOUR HANDSIGNS AND DO A HENGE ON ME," he instructed. "WITH OUR CHAKRA AND WILL COMBINED IT SHOULD WORK! JUST THINK OF SOMETHING WITH FANGS AND CLAWS!"

Was that such a good idea...? "Fangs and claws...?" She blinked in confusion. "Can you really DO that...?" As his answer, the old toad surged forward with more speed than before, earning a startled yelp of surprise. "Eh, w-wait...!

"HERE WE GO!"

Naruto's mind was racing. 'Fangs and claws... fangs and claws...? Could she really do a combined Henge with something that big? And what could possibly beat this thing...? 'What... what do I do...?"

Within the recesses of her mind there was a deep, suffering sigh. ~ MUST I DO EVERYTHING...? ~

Before she could even question what was happening, her hands snapped together in the sign for the henge, red chakra seeping out of her body at an alarming rate. "Ki-Kitsune...?!"

~ HENGE!! ~

From his spot in the trees, Sasuke could only stare with wide, disbelieving eyes as the giant toad was shrouded within a cloud of smoke. Instants later an entirely different form emerged, baring razer sharp claws and glistening fangs.

If it were possible, his eyes widened even further. 'But that's...!'
Shukaku reared back with a startled hiss as the forest was suddenly filled with an earth-shattering, gutteral roar. ~ Y... ~ Golden eyes widened in fear and awe. ~ YOU...? ~

In place of Gamabunta, the Boss Toad - making for far more imposing a figure - stood a creature that had not been seen in the flesh for 12 years...

Ruby red eyes narrowed in on the tanuki, a crimson-furred maw twisting into a sadistic grin. ~ WHAT'S WRONG, SHUKAKU...? ~ intoned the Kyuubi no Youko. ~ I THOUGHT YOU SAID YOU WANTED TO PLAY...? ~

End Chapter 19
Touching down in a small forest clearing with his squadron in tow, the Oto-nin captain scowled uneasily at the sudden tide of demonic chakra rushing over him. 'So powerful...' he shuddered inwardly. 'And foul...'

"Taichou..." one of his subordinates called out worriedly. "What is that...?!

"Don't worry about it," he grunted. "It's all part of the plan."

"Plan?"

He nodded, smirking lightly beneath the dark mask that concealed his face from view. "You forgot already? That Sand Kid's a Jinchuuriki created by Suna. The only reason he's here is because he's crazy enough to let loose that demon on anything that comes in his path."

"Sounds pretty messed up," one Jounin shuddered.

"But pretty damned efficient." another grunted. "With him around, we don't hafta worry about clean up."

The captain nodded, scanning the forest floor before them. Several sets of tracks were visible in the soft earth.

"What happens after the war?" one of the other ninja questioned. "Is that kid really as bloodthirsty as they say?"

The captain snorted. "After the war he ain't our problem anymore." he frowned. "Suna made him so they'll hafta deal with him." He gazed back down at the tracks in front of them. Those brats had given them a pretty good run, but it was obvious now that they were running out of steam. "They're either tired or scared," he murmured. "They're not even trying to conceal their tracks anymore."

"Well... you're only half right." The eight jounin looked up in surprise at the sound of the gruff voice behind them. A scrawny boy with his hair drawn up in a spiky ponytail dropped down out of the trees, regarding them with a bored look of annoyance.

The captain blinked in surprise. That kid was one of their targets! "You?" He made a move for his only to find that the limb would not obey his command. "What the hell... my arm?!" His eyes darting around the area, he found that his men were experiencing the same mysterious affliction.

"I wouldn't bother struggling," the boy murmured. "You're trapped within the infamous Kagemane no jutsu." He glanced down, leading their eyes down the shadow trailing from his body to theirs.

"You were leading us..." the captain scowled.

"Pretty much," he shrugged. "Though you were right in saying I was getting pretty tired... This whole thing is way too troublesome."
The Oto-nin grumbled and growled in frustration and confusion. To think that they had been bested by a single genin! What was this kid, 12? It was ridiculous!

Shikamaru studied his captives, his eyes narrowed in concentration. Eight Otogakure Jounin... His mind thought back to Pakkun's words during their trek through the forest canopy.

~ "Eight... no, nine ninja... most likely jounin given their size." ~

The shadow user sighed. 'Okay... eight ninja here... then that means the ninth and final ninja is still out there somewhere... No doubt hanging back to provide assistance if the others get caught.' Dark eyes scanned the canopy. 'Guess that means I don't have much time...' He gulped slightly. 'Man... how troublesome...'

The Oto captain studied the young genin, watching as the shadow jutsu wavered slightly. "You're wasting your time, kid," he smirked. "I doubt this little trap jutsu of yours is gonna hold out much longer." 'And when it fails... I'm gonna enjoy putting you out of your misery...'

"I suppose you're right..." Shikamaru muttered. Maybe he should have trained harder. A smirk passed over his face. 'Ino would have kittens if she heard me say that...' He reached into his weapons pouch, drawing out several shuriken. The eight jounin mirrored his action, though there were no weapons in their hands. "But if I finish you guys off now, then it won't matter!" He hurled the metal projectiles, watching as they sped towards their targets. 'C'mon... c'mon... hit the mark...!'

With a quick flash, each shuriken was knocked of its course by a single kunai.

His concentration broken, Shikamaru's eyes widened in horror as his Kagemane no jutsu fell away. 'Shit!'

The Oto-nin captain's expression was positively sinister. He stared up into the trees above the Leaf genin's head, his eyes narrowing in wicked intent. "All right," he called out. "Kill him."

A ninth and final Oto-jounin jumped down out of the trees, landing behind Shikamaru with a kunai raised.

Was this it? Was he really going to die this way...? Shikamaru found the saying about your entire life flashing before your eyes right before death to be entirely untrue. He didn't see his birth, the first time he won a game of shogi, or his introduction to Ino and Chouji. He didn't see his first day at the Academy, the day after his 9th birthday where he'd received his first kiss, or the day he'd received his hitai-ate labeling him a ninja of the Leaf. The only thing he could see was a little spitfire blonde glaring at him. Despite her angry words, he could tell that she was worried about him; that she wanted to switch places with him in order to assure his safety.

That's what friends did, right?

~ "You better not die, Shikamaru!" ~

Breaking promises was so troublesome... He didn't know who was going to be more pissed.

Just as the Oto-nin was about to go in for the kill, another body dropped down out of the trees, crashing down on top of him. Shikamaru could only stare with wide eyes as his would-be killer
was plowed into the ground by none other than... "A-a-asuma-sensei...??"  

The bearded Jounin glanced up at him, smirking in the usual laidback way of his. "Hey, Shikamaru," he replied casually. 

It was hard to say who was more surprised, the young genin or the other remaining Jounin. Wasting no time for pleasantries, Sarutobi Asuma rose from his crouched position, kunai in hand as he engaged the enemy. Metal clashed against metal, bodies fell until there was only one Oto-nin left standing. 

"Son of a bitch..." the Otogakure captain bit out. "How the hell'd you catch up to us so fast...?" 

Shikamaru blinked, quite curious about that as well. 

Asuma smirked. "Well, to be honest I had a little bit of help." 

'Help?' Shikamaru tensed as a figure dropped down beside him. Hand on his kunai, he turned only to spot a familiar pair of sunglasses. "A-aburame Shino...?" The taller genin inclined his head in greeting. "How...?" 

The boy raised his hand, revealing a single black insect running along his outstretched finger. "This is one of the Aburame clan's Kikkaichuu," he explained quietly. "They're very useful in tracking as they can detect even the most faintest of scents. Prior to the start of the exams, I planted a Kikkaichuu on each of the participants. A female, to be exact. They give off a scent detectable only the to male of the species... one that can be traced from just about anywhere..." 

Shikamaru stared at the other genin, unsure of whether to be in awe over the fact that he had literally planted bugs on all of his opponents, or that this is the most he'd ever heard him speak since... ever... Recovering from his shock just slightly, he allowed a small smirk to spread across his face. "Hey, you sure something like that isn't against the rules?"

Shino shrugged. "Doubtful." 

The shadow user laughed. 

"You think this is a game?" the Oto-nin scowled. "I'll kill all of you---eh?" His eyes widened in horror at the dark cloud of insects emerging from the taller genin's sleeves. The thousands of insects converged down upon him like a tidal wave, quickly drowning out his screams. 

Asuma winced slightly, not envying the other jounin for his rather ignoble death. "That's one way to take care of things." he murmured, scratching his head absently. 

"Quite." 

Staring at his fellow leaf ninja, Shikamaru was faced with the reality that yes, he had just been about to die, and yes these two had saved his life. The adrenaline that had been fueling his movements up until this point fizzled away and he dropped to the ground, sighing loudly in exasperation. "Man! This is crazy!"

Shino quirked an eyebrow while Asuma laughed. 

"You did a good job, Shikamaru," he murmured after his laughter subsided. Shikamaru blinked up
at him. "I'm proud of ya." Smirking at his student's embarrassed/bemused expression, Asuma surveyed the trees for any signs of unwanted visitors.

"We're continuing on?" Shino asked quietly.

The smirk gone, Asuma gazed back at them with a shake of his head. They'd noticed a lot of chakra being released as they followed Shikamaru's trail. There was no telling what lay waiting for them. "You two stay here and rest while I go on ahead." He frowned slightly, staring into the distance. The two genin didn't argue, so Asuma took that as his cue to bound off into the trees once more.

'Af...
situation as a whole. "Aren't you the least bit worried, Kakashi?" he asked. "That's Orochimaru up there!"

"I know," the gray-haired ninja replied, recalling his own encounter with the infamous Sannin during the preliminaries. "He didn't even seem to care that I'd attempted to seal off his Curse mark..." Shaking the thought away, he fixed his attention back towards Gai and the battle waging. "His minions are here and throughout the village, I'm sure."

"But the Hokage--"

"Sandaime-sama is Hokage because he is revered as this village's strongest," Kakashi persisted. "And that strength comes from his desire to protect everyone in this village. We must follow his example."

Gai stared at him a few moments before nodding mutely, charging back into the fray once more with a boisterous battle cry.

'Finding true strength in protecting others...That's what Hokage-sama believes in...?' Kakashi followed after Gai, cutting down all the enemy in his path. He was almost certain that ninja across the village were doing the same. After felling another enemy, he reached to adjust his hitai-ate, revealing his spinning Sharingan. 'After all... isn't that where you learned it from, Minato-sensei...?"

Within the confines of the barrier, the battle between the two Hokage continued wage. Chakra flared as jutsu and steel clashed against each other, the two ninja doing everything within their power to subdue the other whilst bystanders within and outside the barrier looked on.

The Yondaime ducked a swipe of Enma's claws, knocking the Summons back with a harsh kick to the chest. He drew another kunai from his waist, rushing forward for another attack when his movements were halted by the sudden rush of demonic chakra. Dull eyes flickered slightly. "Naru..."

Both Sarutobi and Orochimaru started in surprise. "What...?"

Using the moment to their advantage, Enma and the remaining Sarutobi clone took the time to act. Rushing forward, the ape dashed behind the blonde ninja, grasping the blonde in a masterlock hold - his arms pulled up and back to prevent him from escaping. "Do it now!" the ape commanded.

Hissing, Orochimaru moved to intervene, but the Sandaime blocked his path.

Ignoring them both, the clone's hands ran rapidly through a series of seals. Visible only to only the clone's eyes, a large spectral figure appeared. A ceremonial dagger clenched between jagged fangs, the wraith stared down upon them with empty eyes.

Feeling the drain on his chakra, Sarutobi spared his blonde predecessor a pain-filled glance. 'Forgive me, Minato-kun... but you must go back... It is up to you to protect Naru...'

Unseen by them, a spectral hand reached out towards the blonde, grasping onto his soul. As the Death God prepared to detach the astral body from its mortal anchor, it paused, dark brows
furrowing in confusion.

The Sarutobi clone frowned in understanding. "Shinigami-sama must have noticed that the soul is incomplete..." He gazed at the Yondaime still locked within Enma's grip, feeling a small sliver of hope. "That must mean the Seal isn't completely broken... The Kyuubi is still contained!"

Minato's eyes closed slowly and then reopened. Meeting the clone's gaze, the blue depths seemed to regain a little bit of their light. "Sarutobi-occhan..."

"It's all right, Minato-kun," the clone called out. "You don't have to fight any longer." He paused, smiling tremulously. "You can go back to your daughter." With a loud pop, the clone vanished from existence.

As if a spell had been broken, the blonde ninja ceased his struggling, his body falling limp within the Monkey King's grip. As the Shinigami brought down its blade, ripping his soul from its false body, he turned to the real Sarutobi with a genuine smile on his face. "I'll see you around, Occhan."

The soul in its possession, the Shinigami vanished from sight. And just like that, the Great Kiiroi no Senko, Yondaime Hokage was gone was again.

Enma let out a startled gasp as the body within his grasp hardened like stone, before crumbling away like sand to reveal the corpse of a younger Sound Ninja, his bandage-wrapped face permanently frozen in an expression of sheer terror. "What is the meaning of this...?"

Sarutobi turned hard eyes back to his serpentine student. "You sacrificed one of your own ninja to carry out your twisted plan, Orochimaru?" he snarled. "You would go so far...?"

The Sannin merely scoffed in response. "I grow tired of your preaching, old man..." He drew the Kusanagi once more, rushing towards the Hokage with startling speed. "Die already - and take this pathetic village with you!"

ooo

Naruto took one look at the familiar dark expanse of her unconscious mind, before whirling around in confusion. "What happened?" she called out, startled at the sound of her voice echoing back at her. "Gamabunta-jiisama? Are you here?"

"NOT 'HERE' HERE... THERE'S NOT ENOUGH ROOM IN THIS LITTLE BLONDE MOP OF YOURS FOR ALL OF ME..."

Relieved that their merging of wills had been successful, the blonde chose to ignore the jibe. "What's going on?"

"YOU TELL ME, KID, I'M JUST AS BAFFLED AS YOU..."

Naruto frowned slightly. 'Great...' she muttered to herself. 'Then how are we supposed to fight the Shukaku...?'

A low chuckle sounded in the dark void, echoing all around her. ~WHY DON'T YOU LEAVE THAT TO ME, LITTLE JAILER...~
Whipping her head around to follow the sound of that annoyingly smooth voice, Naruto suddenly realized the implications of their situation. Blue eyes widen in outrage and disbelief. "Just what the HELL is going on here?!" she shrieked.

"KID...?" Gamabunta called.

There was another deep chuckle, this one far more smug than the first. ~ *RELAX... WOULD YOU REALLY BEGRUDGE AN OLD FOX A LITTLE PLAY TIME...? ~*

"Play time my ass..." the blonde kunoichi snarled. "You sneaky bastard... what the hell do you do?" She turned to 'move' towards the Fox's cage, only to be stopped by a hand at her wrist. More startled at the fact that she could 'feel' the contact more so than there was any one around to make contact with, Naruto whirled around to make protest only to have her words die an agonizing death in her throat. Blue eyes widened in surprise at the figure before her.

Dressed in a tight black, sleeveless shirt and dark burgundy hakama, he towered over her, gazing down at her with eyes like molten lava. His hair was red and wild like fire, messy bangs framing his face and long locks cascading over his tanned shoulders and down his broad back. His face, smooth and lean, bore jagged whisker marks - three on each cheek. These same marks were duplicated on his clawed, bangle-adorned hands, one of which encased the blonde's arm in a vise-like grip.

Naruto was speechless. "K... K..."

~ *WHAT IS WRONG, LITTLE JAILER? ~* the figure replied, leaning downwards until he was face to face with the smaller girl. ~ *DID YOU NOT WISH I HAD A NECK THAT YOU COULD THROTTLE...? ~*

The blonde merely blinked, her poor brain trying to come to grips with the image before her. Was this really the Kyuubi no Youko...? What the hell had happened? Her brain rattled through a few possible explanations before settling on one. Her eyes narrowed up at the humanoid figure before her. Scowling, she wrenched her arm out of his grip, backing away a few paces. Though she knew it probably wouldn't make a difference, she drew a kunai from her pouch, pointing it towards him. "I thought you said you couldn't take control?"

If he were surprised at how quickly the girl regained her bearings, he didn't show it. ~ *NO, I ONLY SAID THAT I WOULDN'T. ~* He paused at the accusing glare she sent his way. Was it possible that she truly didn't fear him? How curious. ~ *YOU ARE FREE TO RECLAIM THE REIGNS AT ANY TIME... ~* He paused and turned away, his tanned face twisting into an expression mixed of annoyance and regret. ~ *THOUGH IN A FEW MOMENTS IT WON'T MATTER... ~*

Naruto frowned in confusion. "What's that mean...?" She followed the fox's gaze, blinking in confusion when the gates of the prison appeared. Her blue gaze fell upon the seal hanging on its bars, her eyes widening as the frail torn paper seemed to be slowly knitting itself back together. "Wha..."

"IF I HAD TO WAGER A GUESS..." Gamabunta's voice echoed around her. "YOUR SEAL IS BEING REPAIRED BY SOMEONE ON THE OUTSIDE."
"If it's being repaired, how did he get out?"

The fox smirked at her. \textit{~STRENGTH OF WILL, LITTLE JAILER, DON'T YOU REMEMBER?~}

She narrowed her eyes at him before thinking back to the moment where she had combined her will with the Frog Boss. No doubt the demon had used that opportunity to slip through the cracks of her defenses. Had he been able to do so because of the seal? "What the hell are you playing at, Fox?" she snapped. "I thought you said you didn't want to go walking around posing as me!"

\textit{~I MOST CERTAINLY DO NOT,~} the fox sniffed. \textit{~THOUGH I CERTAINLY HAVE NO DESIRE TO BE DEFEATED BY SOMETHING AS INSIGNIFICANT AS THE ICHIBI EITHER.~} The molten eyes seemed to glow more brightly. \textit{~I AM THE KYUUBI NO YOUKO... I SUBMIT TO NO ONE!~}

'Arrogant ass'd prick...' Naruto thought to herself. 'He's worse than Sasuke.' She closed the distance between them once more, never lowering her blade. "Well guess what, fox? I am Uzumaki Naru, and this is my body so you're sure as hell gonna submit to me!"

"KID..." Gamabunta called out worriedly.

The Kyuubi stilled before allowing his demonic chakra to flow out him in a rush. It crashed into the blonde like an angry tidal wave, nearly knocking to her knees. However, she stood her ground, keeping her blade steady.

\textit{~FOOLISH BRAT...~} the fox snarled, his deceptively human features taking on a more bestial quality. \textit{~WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU CAN STAND UP TO THE MIGHT OF A DEMON?~}

Blue eyes cold as ice glared back up at him. "Because I don't give up," was her response. "And I don't run away. That is my nindo."

"NARUTO..." The old frog's voice held awe and respect.

Naruto kept her gaze on her tenant's. "I told you before, fox," she replied. She pointed back towards the gates. "You don't like how I'm runnin' things... you know where the door is."

The fox's eyes narrowed and the two continued to stare each other down in silence before Gamabunta spoke up again.

"HEY, KID... THERE'S NOT A LOT OF TIME LEFT... ONCE THAT SEAL COMPLETELY HEALS ITSELF, YOUR CHAKRA'S GONNA HIT ROCK BOTTOM FASTER THAN YOU CAN SAY SASSAFRASS."

"So, we've got a time limit, huh?" A fox grin spread across her face. "I like a challenge. We haven't wasted too much time here have we?"

"THIS IS ALL IN YOUR HEAD, KID... THE FURBALL HERE'S BEEN HOLDIN' DOWN THE FORT ON THE OUTSIDE DURING YOUR LITTLE 'CONVERSATION'."
"All right then, let's do this!" She gave the fox a challenging smirk. "I'm takin' the reigns back, Fox! It's time to put an end to this fight!"

The Kyuubi scowled at her before concealing his displeasure beneath a smirk. ~ *DO YOU REALLY THINK YOU CAN?* ~

Naruto gave him a menacing fox grin. "You said it yourself, Fox. Strength of will."

He paused, his smirk turning mischievous. ~ *WE SHALL SEE...* ~ Slowly, his false body began to fade away until only the molten eyes were visible. ~ *DO TRY NOT TO DIE.* ~

"Ha!" she crowed. "I'm not gonna die - I have too many people to protect!" She closed her eyes and then opened them again to the battle currently being waged between Shukaku and the henge'd Gamabunta. The tanuki demon had just fired off another sand bullet that "Kyuubi" jumped up into the air to avoid. Dodging a swipe of its scaly tail, the transformed Summons dove in for the kill, clamping its sharp teeth and claws into the Shukaku's pseudo-flesh.

Real or not, the Ichibi let out a shriek of pain and fury.

"*DO IT NOW!*" Gamabunta snapped.

"*Right!*" Acting quickly, Naruto jumped from her perch atop the Toad Boss, simultaneously releasing the henge. With an amazing feat of acrobatic ability, the small blonde touched down atop the Shukaku's head and raced towards its Jinchuuriki with a fist pulled back. "All right, Gaara, it's time to rise and shine!"

Her fist hit the redhead head on with the force of a brick wall. Gaara grunted in pain, his pale eyes snapping open. ~ *NOOOO!* ~ The Shukaku wailed. ~ *NO FAAIIIRR...* ~ A few moments later his presence faded and he was gone.

Unsure whether to be relieved or furious, Gaara turned towards the blonde with murder in his eyes. Once again she had failed to die! "Why... why can't I kill her...?!" "Youuu..."

"Party's over, Gaara!" Naruto ground out. "Release Sakura right now!"

The redhead sneered. "I don't take orders from you!" He raised his arms, willing his sand to rise up around the blonde, smirking victoriously at her startled gasp. "Sand Coffin!"

Safe atop his father's head, Gamakichi let out a yelp of disma at the peril now facing the young kunoichi. "Oyaji!"

"*ON IT!*" The frog Boss's tongue cracked outwards like a whip, wrapping around the blonde to protect her from the other Jinchuuriki's attack.

Gaara merely snarled. "You think I'm a fool?!"

Gamabunta frowned at the wild look in the boy's eyes. 'THIS ISN'T GOOD...' he thought to himself. 'THIS KID'S NOT GONNA STOP UNTIL HE KILLS SOMEBODY...' He glanced over at his new subordinate, taking in her determined but obviously exhausted
"I'll wipe you out of existence..." Gaara vowed. "I REFUSE TO DISAPPEAR!"

ooo

Sarutobi started at the speed of Orochimaru's approach, turning to reach out his
Summon. "Enma!" he called out. "Come!"

Nodding in understanding, the Monkey King rushed forward, transforming into the nyoi-bo once
more. However, before he could reach the Hokage, he was snatched out of his trajectory by a
cluster of snakes. "Sarutobi!"

"Enma! No!" His back turned to his enemy far too long, he was suddenly overcome by a sudden
jerking sensation, followed by a surge of pain. He glanced down, eyes widening slightly at the
sight of the blade protruding out of his middle.

Far closer than he had been moments before, Orochimaru let out a satisfied chuckle.

Beyond the barrier, the ANBU yelled in outrage and despair. "HOKAGE-SAMA!"

"No..." Enma moaned. Though he had released his henge, the snakes still held him bound
tightly. "Sarutobi..."

Orochimaru's chuckles only increased. "Finally, we come to the end," he purred. "To you and this
pathetic village..."

Staggering slightly, Sarutobi struggled to keep himself upright. "Orochimaru... you are a fool..." he
gasped out. "Do you really think by killing me, Konoha will fall?" At the Sannin's frown, he let
out a raspy chuckle. "Even now, you still do not understand what true strength means..."

The Sannin tensed and scowled.

"You seek immortality because you believe it will grant you power... We mortals are not meant for
such things..."

"Say what you like, Old man!" he hissed. "You cannot stop me! I will learn every jutsu ever
made! I will have Sasuke! And I will become all-powerful!"

Pushing down his pain, the Hokage faced the younger ninja with a determined scowl. "Then I
shall help you... by introducing you to a jutsu you've never seen before..." 'The very jutsu that took
Minato's life...' Bloodied hands flashed quickly through the necessary signs before latching onto
Orochimaru's shirt. The Sannin let out a gasp of disgust and surprise. "SHIKI FUUIJIN!"

A strange sensation overtook the Sannin, causing him to lurch forward in a cold sweat. 'What...
what is this feeling...?' He gazed upwards to question his teacher when yellow eyes suddenly
locked onto the giant wraith hovering behind him. "What is that?!"

"The God of Death, Shinigami," Sarutobi explained. "He knows of your deeds and he comes for
your soul."

"Then he can have yours!" Orochimaru spat. "You're one foot in the grave already!" He struggled,
trying to break the old man's hold on him but it would not budge.

"Indeed..." the Hokage sighed. "He shall have mine as well." He paused, grinning up at the horrified Sannin. "Shall we go together?"

Eyes widening, Orochimaru let out a blood curdling scream. "You fool! You think I'm going to let a feeble old man like you kill me?"

Sarutobi winced, keeping his grip firm. "I haven't the strength to kill you," he murmured. "But I will stop you..." He grunted in discomfort as he felt the Shinigami's ghostly hand slip through him and into Orochimaru to latch onto his soul. The younger ninja let out a hiss of pain, his skin paling and his body trembling. "I will take away all the jutsus you hold so dear... a fitting punishment, wouldn't you say?"

The Snake Sannin's eyes widened in horror and disbelief. "You wouldn't dare!!" He gasped in terror as spectral versions of his limbs were drawn from his body only to be hacked away by the Death God's blade. He screamed again as his arms fell limp at his sides, turning a sickly purple. "My arms! My arms! Curse you, old man! Curse you!"

The end approaching, Sarutobi raised his hands into the final seal. Grunting in pain as the ancient, ornate kanji appeared on his body, he met his student's eyes with a solemn glare. "The seal is set!" he exclaimed. "With your arms sealed you shall never again form another hand sign. Ninjutsu is forever out of your reach!" His eyes narrowed. "You are finished!"

"Curse you to fires of Hell, Sarutobi!" Orochimaru spat, his face drenched in a cold sweat as his brain struggled to come to terms with what had just occurred. It just wasn't possible! There was no way that he could be defeated now! "Give me back my arms!"

The old Hokage chuckled weakly, the extent of his injuries finally catching up with rapid speed. He staggered backwards, the strength fading from his limbs as swiftly as falling rain. "Orochimaru, you are a fool," he whispered raspily. "My only regret... is that I could not take you with me..."

Orochimaru stared back at him seething, his eyes full of hatred.

"And so, my student..." His body finally succumbing to exhaustion, the Sandaime no Hokage crumpled to the ground. As his eyes slowly drifted shut, his last sight was not of the angry, twisted creature who sought only his own glory, but of a young misguided boy he had hoped to turn into a strong, worthy ninja. "...Farewell..."

The sound of his last breath was drowned out by the sound of the ANBU crying out to him. "SANDAIME-SAMA!!!"

"HOKAGE-SAMA, NO!"

ooo

"I will kill you, Uzumaki Naruto!" Gaara snarled from his perch atop the dormant Shukaku's head. "You cannot escape from me!!"

Naruto stared back at him, her expression never wavering. 'I have to stop this now...' she murmured, her mind flashing to her two teammates. 'Sakura... Sasuke...' She slowly pulled her
jacket, casting it off into the wind as she brought her hands together in a chakra-moulding hand seal. *'Kyuubi...'* she called out. *'I'm putting an end to this now. I just need some of your chakra.'*

There was a very long pause before the fox deigned to answer. ~ **USE IT WELL.** ~

Suddenly red chakra shot up around her, whipping up and around her with all the force of a hurricane. She took it all in with no complaint, never noticing when her hitai-ate was snatched from her brow, fluttering off into the forest below. *'This is the end of the line, Creepy Eyes.'*

Gaara let out a sharp gasp at the glowing red eyes gazing back at him. "You..." His sand surged upwards in his defense as the blonde dashed towards him. "Stay away from me!!"

"I will protect Sakura and Sasuke..." Fighting against the sandy grip, Naruto slowly closed the distance between them. She was face to face with the wide-eyed red head now, despite her inability to move her arms. *'Well... there's only one thing for it...' "I will protect EVERYONE!"

Pain shot through Gaara's body the moment Naruto's head rammed into his, destroying what little concentration he had left. With the jutsu maintaining the giant beast dispelled, the sand fell away and the two began their plummet towards the forest floor.

In the distance, Sasuke watched their fall with wide, disbelieving eyes. *'She did it... She actually did it...'*

Gamabunta regarded the blonde, an impressed smirk working its way around his pipe. *'NICELY DONE, KID... YOU'D DO YOUR OLD MAN PROUD...'* Yellow eyes gazed upwards towards his own offspring. *'OUR TIME'S SPENT, GAMAKICHI. LET'S GO HOME...'*

"Sure thing, oyaji!"

The chakra supporting the two gone, the Summons vanished in an explosion of smoke that knocked the two Jinchuuriki into neighboring trees. They each quickly struggled to gain purchase in the thick branches, staring each other down.

"That's it..." Naruto wiped the sweat from her brow, blue eyes dulled slightly from exhaustion. "I've just about reached my limit..." She gazed across the distance at Gaara, who looked just as worn down as her. "And I bet you have, too..." When he didn't respond, she smirked ruefully. "You an' me are a whole lot alike, y'know... For us to be fighting like this... it just isn't right..."

Gaara remained silent, staring at the blonde that reminded him so much of Yashamaru. Her? Like him? He wanted to scoff out loud. The only thing they had in common were the demons sealed within them. There was no way she had any idea what it was like. He paused, grimacing in his attempts to keep down the memories. There was no way he'd allow himself to be weak! Never again! Letting out a yell of anguish and frustration, he leapt from his perch.

At the same time, Naruto surged towards him. Drawing her arm back, she slammed her fist across his chin once more, sending him spiralling down towards the ground. As the two of them plummeted downwards, similar thoughts ran through their brains.

*I... I cannot lose...'*
Gaara stared at the other ninja, falling along side of him. He couldn't allow himself to be defeated. *I cannot disappear!*

Naruto mind was focused on that of her comrades, wondering what had become of them during their battle. *Sakura, Sasuke... no matter what I can't let you die...*

Before long, their fall ended abruptly as the two slammed simultaneously into the mossy earth, leaves and sand swirling and mixing settling together.

After that, the forest fell silent once more.

ooo

Orochimaru stared at the dark, withered stalks that had once been his limbs, his brain numb with shock. "M-my arms... he took my arms..."

One his escorts, a pale ninja with white hair and dark make-up banged against the side of the barrier, his face a mask of worry. "Orochimaru-sama!"

The Sannin hissed, glancing over his shoulder. "Our mission has failed... Release the barrier..." He gazed down at the prone figure at his feet, his eyes narrowing in disgust. "Take me back!"

The four Oto-ninja nodded, raising their hands simultaneously into the 'release' seal with a unison cry of "KAI!" Almost instantly, the barrier vanished and they all rushed to their master's aid. Two of the nin lifted the Sannin and leapt into the air while the other two followed behind.

Seeing the opportunity to attack, the ANBU squad rushed into action.

"Now!" Tiger drew a kunai from the folds of his cloak, preparing to strike.

ooo

Kakashi and Gai watched as the ANBU took off in pursuit only to be subdued by a sticky net conjured up by one of the Oto-ninja.

"Damn it, it was a trap..." the Taijutsu master growled.

"And ANBU ran right into it..." The Copy Ninja's red eye narrowed in annoyance.

Genma touched down beside them, a little bloody but no worse for the wear. "We goin' after them?" he asked.

"No," the gray haired ninja answered. "It'll most likely be another trap."

"Clever one... aren't you, Hatake-san?"

The three Leaf Jounin looked up at the sight of a cloaked ANBU and Suna Jounin standing at the other side of the arena. They all tensed, hands reaching slowly towards their respective weapon pouches.

Kakashi's eyes narrowed even further. "So," he drawled. "Are you going to run away again... Kabuto...?"
The ANBU paused. Reaching to his mask, he drew it away to reveal the glasses and smug countenance of one Yakushi Kabuto. "I see no reason for me to stay," he answered finally, a smirk making its way across his youthful face. "After all, it's much more fun keeping you in the dark." His smirk formed into a grin at the dark look Kakashi sent his way. "It's just too bad you're not an Uchiha," he sighed. "If you'd truly mastered that Sharingan of yours, you'd be able to see everything." He chuckled and then shrugged. "Oh well. See ya." Raising his hands into the sign of a transportation jutsu, he and the Sand ninja Baki vanished from sight.

Though they were gone, Kakashi continued to stare at the spot where they had once stood, his fists clenched tightly at his sides.

ooo

Though he was overcome by both overwhelming sensations of exhaustion and pain, Kankuro managed to stand up, supporting himself against the large tree branch on which he stood. He closed his eyes, concentrating. "It's stopped, hasn't it?"

Beside him, Temari paused a few moments before giving a tentative nod. There was no describing the relief she felt knowing that they had managed to escape mostly unscathed. The last time Gaara had transformed... it hadn't been pretty. She paused again, her turquoise eyes darkening just slightly.

Kankuro studied her expression, his own turning gravely serious. "We're going back for him, aren't we?" he asked.

She jumped slightly before answering. "Yes." She searched his expression for any sign of protest or disbelief, slightly surprised to find none. Turning away from him, her expression turned solemn once more. "Above everything... he is still our brother." Crouching down slightly, she vanished into the trees.

Kankuro paused a few moments before following after her. "Right."

ooo

Watching the sand binding her fall away like water, Sasuke bound across the clearing, snatching Sakura's unconscious body out of the air before gravity could lay its claim. His body screaming its protests, he touched down on the ground, setting her down as gently as he could manage.

Dark eyes gazed at her sleeping face. 'Sakura...' His brain kept replaying the image of her jumping in front of him, kunai raised in his defense. She had to have known she was committing suicide, but she'd done it anyway. 'Why...?'

~ "If it's not too much a bother," ~ He remembered the blush that had stolen across her face. ~ "You can let me look after you, too..." ~

~ "Then why?!" ~

~ "How should I know...? My body moved on its own..." ~

~ "I told you I don't abandon my teammates! And certainly not my friends! So just shut up cuz you're stuck with me!" ~
"Naruto..." Sasuke glanced upwards sharply, his eyes falling on Pakkun as he approached him slowly dragging a familiar orange and blue jacket behind him. Taking the obscenely bright garment in hand, he gently tucked it underneath the unconscious girl's head.

"She gonna be all right...?" the dog asked, gazing down at the girl.

"Yeah," With a small grunt of discomfort, Sasuke rose to his feet once more. "I'll leave her with you." Without another word he vanished into the trees once more.

"Hey, wait!" Realizing he was gone, Pakkun groaned in frustration. "Kids these days... These brats are gonna be the death of me..."

ooo

Flat on his back, unable to move any of his limbs, Gaara could only watch with wide, disbelieving eyes the sight before him. Several yards away, the very same blonde who had quailed under his gaze had, fought him tooth and nail, subdued his demon as well as her own, had fallen the same distance and mostly likely sustained the same amount of injuries was now slowly struggling to rise to her feet. *How... How is it she can keep going...?*

Oblivious to his scrutiny, Naruto let out sharp yell of pain as her leg folded beneath her and sent her tumbling to the ground once more. However, refusing to be deterred, she pushed herself up on her elbows, slowly dragging her body across the forest floor towards him.

Gaara let out a gasp of fear, his eyes widening even further. He could see it now - the girl was stronger than him, far stronger than he could ever hope to be. She would kill him, he was certain. He had failed his purpose once more and would now truly disappear. "No... no... I don't want that... I don't want that... Stay away from me! I don't want to disappear!"

The blonde paused, staring down at her dirt stained hands. "I know..." she murmured quietly. "I understand..." Gaara stilled. "I was once where you are... in that dark and terrible place..." She paused, her eyes clouding with memories. "Everyone's afraid of you... they hate you and call you an outcast... a freak... a monster..." She lowered her head, her bangs falling in her eyes. "I hated it... and I hated everyone for making me feel that way..."

The Suna ninja watched her hands clenching and unclenching in the grass. His mind played back memories of his own past; the isolation, the scorn... the acceptance and hope that finally turned into the bitterness of betrayal. Was it possible that the blonde had felt these things, too?

Unaware of his thoughts, Naruto thought back to that day in her past that had become a turning point in her life. She remembered the young girl she'd spotted crying on the hillside, thinking to herself that just maybe there were others out there just as sad and lonely as she was. Knowing how she hated feeling the way she did, she'd vowed to protect others like her by becoming Hokage.

~ *"I'm gonna get strong and protect everyone! I'm gonna be the greatest Hokage ever - Uzumaki Naruto!" ~*

"I decided then that I would get stronger and protect everyone so that they'd finally see how important - how special I could be."

~ *"That way, no one'll pick on me for bein' a girl! I'm gonna get stronger and prove to everybody..."*
that I can be a great ninja - believe it!"

The redhead continued to stare at her in silence, his face void of any emotion.

"After that I met Iruka-sensei..." A tremulous smile made its way to her face. "And lots of others... people who accepted me, acknowledged me as somebody... somebody important..." She thought of all the people she deemed precious in her life: Hokage-jiji, Ichiraku-jiji and Ayame-neesan, Shikamaru and Chouji, Kakashi-sensei and Sakura-neechan, even Sasuke, and now Lee and Hinata as well...

Suddenly an image of Haku flashed before her mind's eye. ~ "He took me in, knowing what I was. He stayed with me, cared for me... I vowed that I would do whatever I could to repay him... He was my one and only precious person..." ~

'I understand now, Haku...' She finally gazed up at Gaara with watery blue eyes, eliciting a ragged gasp of surprise. "These same people... they pulled me out of the darkness... and for that I will always do whatever it takes to keep them safe and happy..." Bracing herself for the pain, she slowly rose to her feet, those teary eyes turning to polished steel once more. "Even if it means I have to kill you!"

Gaara gazed at her with wide eyes, his mouth dry. Bruised and bloodied and broken, he couldn't recall ever seeing anything more terrifying and awe-inspiring than the tiny blonde swaying on her feet in front of him. Despite all odds she was still managing to keep going... and it wasn't even for her own sake! She could have fled at any time to save her own life, but she had stayed. More than that, she had won.

~ "So long as I have people to protect, I WON'T DIE!" ~

Fighting for someone other than yourself. Devotion... sacrifice... He didn't understand these things. Yashamaru had spoken to him of love once, but he hadn't understood. Was that why he kept seeing his face when he looked at her? The teachings he had tried to instill in him before his inevitable betrayal? 'To protect others... is that the purpose you found for yourself?' he wondered. "Is it really love for others... that makes you so strong... Yashamaru...?"

Naruto blinked at him, but before she could question his strange behavior, a black blur suddenly appeared in front of her. "Hold it, Naruto."

Recognizing the scent of steel and smoke belonging to that of her teammate, the blonde's eyes widened in surprise and relief. "Sa-Sasuke... you're all right...?"

He nodded, uneasy under the honest emotion on display in those blue depths. "Sakura is, too." he murmured. "It's over now."

"Okay." A relieved smile blossomed across her face. "I'm glad." Without warning, Naruto's body shut down and she slipped quietly into unconsciousness.

Startled, Sasuke caught her as she pitched forward, slowly easing her down to the ground. "Naruto..."

At that same moment, Kankuro and Temari appeared, touching down beside the still form of their brother. The atmosphere intensified as the three crouching ninja waited for someone to make the first move.
"That's enough,"

Temari blinked, staring at the young redhead laying at her feet. "G-Gaara...?"

The boy gazed over at the blonde once more before turning his gaze skyward. "I'm done fighting now," he murmured quietly. "It's over."

Kankuro gazed down at him in awe, taking in the raw exhaustion evident in his features. 'I can't believe what I'm seeing...' he thought to himself. 'Gaara's actually had it...' He gazed over at the unconscious blonde, guarded closely by the tense Uchiha. "All right, Gaara." Wasting no time, he leaned forward, grasping his brother's arm. Draping it over his shoulder while Temari echoed his actions on the other side, they lifted him up and vanished into the trees once more. "Let's go home."

Once he was certain they were gone, Sasuke rose to his feet with the blonde clutched closely to his side. Once again she had risked herself to save his life... and succeeded. He gazed down at her, noting the gentle smile on her face. "Naruto... I just don't understand you at all..." After one more glance to assure their safety, he limped back into the trees to where he'd left Sakura and Pakkun. Never once did he loosen his grip on the blonde.

ooo

Meanwhile in the remains of the village Stadium, the surviving Leaf Jounin gathered around in a tight circle, their minds unable to wrap themselves around the sight before them.

The Sandaime no Hokage was dead.

"I don't understand it..." Aoba murmured, a hand clutching a bleeding wound on his forearm. "He looks so... so..."

"Peaceful..." Kurenai murmured softly.

Though they had no way of knowing it, had they laid both Sarutobi and Naruto together side by side, they would have noticed the gentle smiles on their face to be exactly the same.

ooo

Oblivious to the trees rushing by him, Gaara's thoughts lie on the blonde kunoichi to whom he had lost. She housed the Kyuubi no Youko, and yet managed to maintain every ounce of her humanity. Never in all his days had he come across anyone like her. 'Uzumaki Naru... you are truly strong... Perhaps someday...' He trailed off, suddenly aware of the presence of teammates, who despite their fear, had stayed by him. "Temari... Kankuro..."

The two older ninja paused, glancing over at him quietly.

Gaara kept his gaze forward, murming softly, "I'm sorry."

The fan wielder and puppet master gaped at each other in surprise.

Silence reigned for several long moments before Kankuro finally spoke. "Don't worry about it..."
Once again contained behind the bars of its mental prison, Kyuubi sat quietly and watched with no small amount of disdain as the simple paper seal finally regained its unblemished, unhindered state. Everything was as it once was, once more. Pity.

A soft chuckle echoed through the chamber, making the fox's hackles rise in annoyance. "Well," a voice murmured thoughtfully. "It appears everything is back to normal, ne, Kyuubi-sama?"

The demon snorted, ~**YOU AND I HAVE VASTLY DIFFERING OPINIONS AS TO THE MEANING OF THE TERM 'NORMAL', WARDEN.**~

There was a pause. "Maybe so," the voice conceded. "But all that matters is that she's safe..." There was another long pause. "Kyuubi-sama... thank you for protecting my Naru..."

Time stretched by in silence before the kitsune spoke again. ~**IT WAS... IN MY BEST INTEREST.**~

~ End Chapter 20
Chapter 21a: Don't Cry

Chapter Summary

The fallen are mourned and new paths are decided

Chapter 21a

It took a few hours, but the fighting eventually died down. By the time the sun began to set it had ceased altogether. Whether the enemy forces had been beaten back are made a tactical treat, the Konoha survivors neither knew nor cared. They were alive and for now that was all that mattered.

While through the village, ninja and civilians alike let out a sigh of relief, the site of the exams was another matter. The Jounin present on the stadium rooftop fell silent as a shroud was placed over Sarutobi, concealing his face - his gentle smile frozen in death - from view. After a long moment of silence, medic-nin carried his body away to be prepared for burial. The battle-weary ninja watched their departure, still unable to come to grips with the horrible truth.

The Sandaime Hokage was dead.

Gai shook his head, his thick brows furrowed in disbelief. The village had survived the war, but their leader had not. "How did this happen...?"

Jiraiya glanced over at the group of ANBU who had been present at the climactic battle, his head tipping ever so slightly in inquiry.

The ANBU captain nodded back before replying. "It was Orochimaru masquerading as the Kazekage," he answered, ignoring the sharp intakes of breath at the mention of the other Sannin. "He used a jutsu to revive dead ninja and have them fight at his command."

"Zombie ninja...?"

"Has he really the power to bring the dead back to life?" Aoba asked.


The Bear-masked ninja nodded once again. "It required a sacrifice..." he continued. "He used one of his own ninja as a host for the reanimated soul."

Lifting his gaze from the spot where the Hokage's body had rested, Kakashi's gray eye fell on the ANBU captain as he spoke quietly. "Who did he summon?"

Despite being a battle-hardened ninja in his own right, the mask-donned ninja tensed before glancing away uneasily.
After several long moments of silence, Genma clamped down on the senbon in his mouth, growling in annoyance. "Enough with the silent act," he hissed. "Who was it that was summoned from that jutsu? I think after everything that's happened we have the right to know who killed our Hokage!"

The other Jounin nodded in agreement.

"Well...?" Kakashi's voice was barely a whisper, but held an edge sharper than a kunai. "Who was it?"

The ANBU exchanged silent glances before Tiger stepped forward, head bowed. "The Yondaime... Hokage..."

Kakashi's visible eye widened.

"That's impossible!" Gai exclaimed. Several of the other ninja echoed his sentiment.

Jiraiya stepped forward, silencing everyone with a stern look. "Calm down. It doesn't matter if you think it's impossible or not. It already happened." He closed his eyes, a weariness settling over his features before he straightened up and leveled an authoritative gaze upon everyone present. "The Hokage is gone and we got a village in shambles... There's no time for standing around. We've got work to do." He turned to the ANBU captain. "ANBU, gather your squads and split up to secure the gates of the village." The four masked ninja saluted and vanished into thin air. The white-haired Sannin turned back to the remaining Jounin. "You lot scour the village and search for survivors."

"Ryoukai!"

Once their presence had faded, Jiraiya allowed his body to sag as the weight of the situation finally settled upon him. 'The old man... he's really gone...' Dark eyes fell upon the spot where the three coffins had risen. 'Sarutobi-sensei...'

oo Flashback oo

Dark eyes zeroed in on the two shiny bells held out just beyond his reach, narrowing at the taunting tinkling sound they made. Or perhaps that was the smug blonde standing in front of him. "All that talk of winning yourself a bell?" Amber eyes twinkled in amusement. "Guess you're all bark and no bite after all, Ji-Ra-I-Ya..."

The white-haired youth bound against the short pole flushed in embarrassment, kicking his legs out to no avail. "At least I'm not a flat-chested hag like you!"

"Fla...Ha... WHAT? What did you call me?! You take that back, you little--aarrghh!"

Jiraiya was saved from a vicious pummeling by his Jounin-sensei, an exasperated expression visible on his bearded face. "That's enough, you two." He glanced at the flustered blonde and then over at the pale boy standing off to the side. "Tsunade, Orochimaru. You two can go on home. We'll meet here again tomorrow, same time."

"Hai, Sensei." The two youths gave the bound boy a look of disdain before turning back towards
the village.

The remaining ninja-in-training watched them go sullenly before turning away with a petulant huff. "Keh, who needs 'em?"

"You do, Jiraiya." Sarutobi sighed. "We arranged you in three-man squads for a reason. You can't expect to make it very far as a ninja if you're not willing to learn teamwork."

The boy snorted and then wilted under his teacher's reproving gaze. "Yeah, yeah, I know, Sensei..." he sulked. "But can't I get some cooler teammates than those two? Who wants to work with a bossy hag and a snooty know-it-all?"

"Hone your skills to become a great ninja and maybe then you'll be able to pick who you want to work with," the Jounin said with a smirk.

"I'll do that!" the boy crowed, letting out a startled yelp when the older ninja flicked his nose.

"Before you do that, you hafta make it past genin-level." Sarutobi chuckled. "And you can't do that unless you pass my test."

"I will pass!" Jiraiya exclaimed confidently. "And I'll become a super-cool ninja, just you wait and see!" At the Jounin's doubtful look the boy let out a frustrated growl as he struggled against his bindings. "You don't believe me - I'll prove it! I've already master an amazing Invisibility jutsu!"

Sarutobi looked doubtful. "Invisibility jutsu?"

"Yup!" the boy exclaimed proudly. "I tested it out at the Women's bath house and it worked like a charm!"

Silence fell across the small clearing serving as Team 7's training area.

"Well then... I suppose there's only one thing for it..." Jiraiya blinked, watching as a rosy flush settled over his sensei's cheeks. "You're just gonna have to show me this jutsu in action... to test if it really works or not."

The boy gazed at him before allowing a knowing smirk to pass across his face. "Heh, a fellow perv, eh?" The young genin-in-training chuckled lecherously. "I knew there was a reason I liked you, Sensei."

Blinking, Sarutobi let out a startled laugh as he drew a kunai and cut away Jiraiya's ropes. "Women are one of Kami-sama's great gifts to mankind," he answered sagely. "There's no harm in admiring them."

Jiraiya folded his arms across his chest, nodding in agreement. "And someday - after I become a great ninja, of course - I'm gonna write a book all about it!" he crowed. "I'll even dedicate it to you if I'm feeling generous. I'll call it... 'Ecchi Paradise'."

The Jounin chuckled, amused by the boy's antics. "Is that so?"

Dark eyes twinkled up at him. "Believe it!"
Jiraiya roused himself out of his memories, turning to the ninja that had just materialized behind him. A single gray met his. "Forget something?"

Kakashi glanced away, his eye falling on the spot on which the three coffins had risen. "Was it really him?" he asked quietly.

The old ninja sighed heavily. "Seems that way," he answered solemnly. "ANBU said he'd used Hiraishin at one point in the battle."

"But it's just not possible... Sensei forfeit his soul to the Shinigami..."

The Sannin blinked. "That's what the old man told you?" A startled gray eye fell back on him. "The Yondaime did summon the Death God that day... and he did owe it his soul... but from what I was told the two managed to come up with a different arrangement."

The Copy ninja blinked in astonishment. "Sensei made a deal with Death...?"

Jiraiya chuckled softly. It sounded impossible even to his ears. But that was Minato for you... "Yeah, I guess he did." His eyes softened. "That kid certainly had a knack for doing things unconventionally..."

"I know." Kakashi's eye took on a faraway look. He recovered seconds later, staring back up at the Sannin. "What was the deal...?"

Jiraiya closed his eyes, recounting the conversation he had had with the Sandaime. Along with the memory came the despair at knowing he had arrived far too late to provide any assistance. Though the village had been saved, the last of his students was dead.

"Jiraiya-sama...?"

"Shinigami couldn't take the fox's soul to Hell because it was a Bijuu - the greatest of all 9 in fact," he explained tiredly, shoving the painful memories down to mourn over later in private. "Instead, he pulled its soul from its body, placing it within a container the Yondaime supplied."

A grinning blonde appeared before Kakashi's mind's eye, causing him to tense just slightly. "And Sensei...?"

"In exchange for Shinigami-sama's service," Jiraiya continued. "Yondaime agreed to act as seal for the Kyuubi, keeping its powers at bay..."

Kakashi stilled, the implications of the Sannin's words hitting him with the force of a Katon. "So you mean to say... *Sensei* is the Kyuubi's jailer, and not--"

"I don't know any of the technicalities," Jiraiya said with a frown. "Just what I gleaned from the old man." He remembered leaving the village after receiving the Hokage's assurances that it was safe from harm. Though he trusted his old teacher and the skill of his student, he couldn't bare the thought of remaining, certainly not to see the results of Minato's 'handiwork'. Sage he might have been, but he knew staring into those blue eyes would only serve to remind him of his failure.

'Feh... the Great Gama-sennin indeed...' He paused, wondering if perhaps the kid felt the same
The young Jounin gazed down at the ground once more. "So then how was Orochimaru able to summon Sensei’s soul?"

Dark eyes landed on him sharply. "How else?" Jiraiya snapped. "He pulled it from your student weeks ago."

Reeling back, Kakashi’s eye widened in shock and confusion. "What?!"

"Think back," he ground out, his anger at Kakashi’s conduct during the exams returning once more. He knew all too well what it was like to be cast aside by a teacher in favor of a more promising student. Council orders aside, he had thought the boy would have known better. He’d made sure to drive home the importance of teamwork in his students, and he’d made damned sure the blonde had done so with his own. Had that eye of his driven away all the kid’s common sense? "You told me Orochimaru attacked your students in the Forest of Death. You made sure to seal off the Curse Mark left on the Uchiha, but didn’t you check to see if anything strange had happened to the other two?"

Kakashi tensed, recalling the sketchy report he’d been given following the incident. Sakura had reported no injuries and Naruto hadn’t spoken a word to him until after the Preliminaries. Saying ‘she seemed fine’ was certainly no excuse for his inaction, and his guilt regarding his treatment of the blonde returned with a vengeance, leaving him with a sick feeling.

~ "We in Team 7 do not abandon friends, Naruto." ~

~ "Those who abandon their teammates are worse than trash..." ~

Jiraiya watched the myriad of expressions flickering across the usually unreadable ninja's face. Part of him felt a bit of satisfaction at knocking the prodigy down a few pegs, but he also knew it would do no good for anyone to have the boy wallowing in guilt. Especially when there was still time to undo the mistake. 'I hope...' He stretched out his senses, frowning at the lack of demonic chakra that had seemed to permeate the air not too long ago. He could only hope that the Sandaime's attempts to correct the damage done to the Seal had been successful. All the same... "I'm gonna head out," he grumbled, drawing chakra to his hands in preparation for a transportation jutsu. "I can only hope that the kid's still in one pi--"

Both ninja paused at the small group of chakra signatures rapidly approaching them. "Sakura! Naruto!"

"Oi, quit gawking, you two!" Jiraiya snapped, frustration quickly replaced by agitated worry. "We
need some medics right away!"

oooo

From the moment he'd seen the smoke rising from the village stadium, Umino Iruka had known deep within his heart that something was terribly wrong. Following the well-trained instincts that had earned him the respected rank of Chuunin, he had gathered the other Academy teachers to discreetly evacuate the children and civilians out of the village just before the first wave of the invasion forces. Once they were all safely hidden within the secret tunnels of the Hokage monument, allowing Konoha ANBU and Jounin to engage the enemy unhindered, Iruka took comfort in the knowledge that all those under his charge were safe from harm.

All except one...

As soon as he'd heard the news, Iruka had dropped what he was doing, dashing towards the hospital as fast as his legs could carrying him. Barely stopping long enough to get a room number from a startled receptionist, he'd transported himself to her room, calling her name as his eyes scanned the small space for that familiar blonde mop of hair and whiskered cheeks. "Naruto? Naruto!"

"It's all right, Iruka. She's sleeping."

The Chuunin tensed, a hand going for his kunai pouch before recognizing the gray-haired Jounin sitting inside the windowsill. "Kakashi-san...?" His gaze wandered from him to the bed by which he sat, currently occupied by his sleeping student. She looked so small; her whiskered cheeks were covered in bandages, her face drawn and pale. Even her blonde hair seemed to have lost some of its vibrancy, fanned out limply as it was against her pillow. His heart thudding painfully in his chest, Iruka turned to Kakashi once more, questions burning in his eyes.

The Jounin closed his eye, holding back a sigh. "According to her chart, she's suffering depleted Chakra reserves, several chakra burns, as well as a dislocated shoulder and sprained wrist.,"

Given the way he'd cited her list of injuries, it was quite obvious he'd read and reread her medical chart several times. Iruka frowned slightly. 'He must have been here since she was brought in...!" "All this couldn't have come from her fight with Neji...?" The Jounin didn't respond. "Kakashi-san...?"

"I should have listened to her..." The Chuunin blinked. "We knew the kid was off after watching his fight with Gai's student... She warned me... and I let the fight go on anyway..."

Iruka listened to him, trying to make sense of his words. He remembered hearing of Rock Lee's injury during the Preliminaries of the exam from colleagues, recalling their tales of how merciless his opponent had been. Sabaku no Gaara... His eyes widened. "You mean Naruto fought Gaara?"

Kakashi seemed to draw himself out of his musings, turning a gray eye in his direction. "I expect this will all become classified soon, but Gaara is a Jinchuuriki." he explained with a heavy sigh. "The only reason he was entered into the exams was with the hope that he would go beserk and wipe out the village."

"And Naru... somehow stopped him...?"

"I don't know the details on how..." Kakashi continued. "But I sent her, Sakura, and Shikamaru to
intercept Sasuke to prevent him from engaging Gaara in battle..."

The Academy teacher gasped in horror at the thought of sending three genin on a potentially A-Rank mission. "Are they all right?" he asked.

"They're fine," the Copy ninja answered with a breathy sound that could have been construed as a laugh. Although it could have also been another sigh. He'd made so many of them already. "Sakura and Sasuke were released this morning and Shikamaru last night. They all fought well."

'They shouldn't have been placed in that situation at all!' Iruka thought, but held his tongue on the matter. The normally aloof Jounin looked guilty enough as it was. He recalled his harsh words to him outside of the Hokage Tower, and almost felt compelled to apologize for them. 'No...' He gave a mental shake of his head. 'I meant what I said and I'm gonna stand by it... Still...' With a deep sigh, he sat down on the opposite side of the bed, sparing the sleeping blonde a fond look before turning his attention back to the Jounin once more. "She'll forgive you, you know," he murmured. Kakashi looked up at him, blinking slowly. "Naruto... I don't think she's one to hold a grudge..." He smiled gently. "She thinks rather highly of you, after all..."

"I know..." Kakashi sighed once more. His gaze fell on the blonde, the look in his eye a mixture of relief and regret. "And that's what makes it even worse..."

ooo

Naruto opened bleary blue eyes to a thick green canopy. She frowned slightly in confusion. Hadn't she been... where had she been actually? The blonde found it curious that she couldn't remember.

"Sleeping on the ground again?" A chuckle sounded over her head and she blinked, craning her neck to follow it. "You're going to catch a cold if you're not careful."

Springing upwards, the blonde whipped her head around to face the figure kneeling beside her. Blue eyes widened as they took in the familiar raven locks and kind brown eyes. "Ha... Ha..." She jumped forward, latching onto him with all her might. "Haku-nee-san!"

Another soft chuckle sounded in her ear as arms folded themselves around her shoulders. "You do remember that I'm a boy, don't you?"

Releasing her hold on the older boy, Naruto sat back and allowed a blush to spread across her cheeks. "Um, habit... I guess... Sorry..." She fidgeted for a few moments before lunging forward to hug him once more. "I just can't believe that you're actually here! Is this a dream?"

"Yes, it is." The blonde tensed, gazing up at him. Haku smiled. "You're actually unconscious in the hospital, recovering from your injuries."

Naruto frowned in confusion. "I don't..."

"I just wanted to see you one more time," His smile widened. "You've been thinking about me quite a bit..."

The blonde flushed, staring down at her hands as she twiddled her fingers nervously. "Yeah... Y'see... I met someone... A guy--"
Haku’s smile turned into a grin. "Oh?"

Her cheeks turning a bright red, Naruto waved her hands in front of her. "No, no! Not like that!" she exclaimed. Sobering, she continued, "His name's Gaara... and he's like me. There's something inside of him that makes him different from everyone..." She paused, her eyes darkening as she remembered. "He threatened my teammates, so I fought him."

Brown eyes gazed down at her. "What happened?"

"I beat him by using all my chakra, everything I had to give," Naruto answered. "And it made me understand why you did what you did." Haku tilted his head. The blonde gazed up at him, her blue eyes bright. "You were willing to do anything to protect those precious to you."

Settling himself down in front of her, Haku turned his gaze skyward as he gathered his thoughts. "It's strange," he murmured quietly, watching birds fly by through the breaks in the tree canopy. "People seem to fight so much harder when loved one's lives are at stake..."

"But Gaara was so strong..."

"But he fought only for himself." Brown eyes focused on her once more. "That is not how you realize true strength."

Naruto nodded. "I understand." She paused, remembering his last moments of life on the bridge in Wave Country. Despite the grievous injury he'd sustained at her hand, the moment he'd sensed that Zabuza was in danger, he'd rushed in to protect him, ultimately sacrificing himself... She paused, watching as the boy sitting in front of her wavered in her vision. "Haku..."

Haku rested his hand on her head, smoothing her bangs out of her eyes. "Don't apologize," he said gently. "I don't want you to be sad for me..."

She shuddered, wiping a few rebellious tears from the corners of her eyes. "But you and Zabuza..." she stammered. "I didn't wa... I mean... I never--"

"I know Zabuza-sama and I will be together again someday," Haku closed his eyes with a smile. "So I don't mind the wait." He opened them again, his brown orbs shining brightly. "You and I will see each other again, too," He leaned forward, laying a gentle kiss against her forehead. Naruto let out a soft gasp. Haku's smile turned playful as he gave her a little wink. "Just not too soon, ok?"

Still blushing slightly, Naruto wiped the remaining tears from her eyes before giving him a shaky smile. "I still gotta become Hokage," she said softly.

Nodding his head, Haku took her hand in his. "Remember what I said to you," he told her. "You are truly strong... I know you will become great ninja." He kept his grip on her hand, even as his body slowly began to fade away.

Naruto watched him go, smiling truemulously. "Goodbye, Haku..."

Haku smiled, barely visible in the forest light. "Goodbye, Naru..."

A few moments later he was gone and Naruto was alone once more.
"...ruto... to... Naruto...!"

The blonde opened her eyes slowly, her last moments of consciousness rushing back to the forefront of her mind like a tsunami. "Gaara!" She bolted upwards, reaching for the kunai pouch only to let out a yelp as her body seized up in pain.

"Whoa, whoa, take it easy!" Hands reached out towards her, easing her back down against her pillows gently. "It's all right, Naru... you're safe now..."

Naruto gazed upwards into the worried, yet relieved face her old Academy teacher. "I-Iruka-sensei...?" She gawked, taking in the plain white walls of her hospital room. Pale, bruised fingers trailed over the bandage on her cheek as her eyes studied her other arm, bound tight and trussed up in a cloth sling. "But wha...?"

"The war's over," the Chuunin explained gently. "Suna and Otoakure's ninja have been forced back and out of the village."

The blonde let out a sigh of relief. "I'm glad." She let her eyes roam over the Chuunin, searching for any visible signs of injury. "What about you? Are you all right, Sensei?"

Iruka let out a sigh of exasperation. "That should be my line, you," he said in irritation. "I've been worried sick about you - you could've been killed!"

"But I wasn't..." Naruto explained, blinking when the truth of her words caught up to her. She'd survived her ordeal... *The fox... Kyuubi actually helped me...* Her eyes widened. She had to tell the Old Man! "Where's Hokage-jiji? I hafta talk to him!"

Iruka's face took on a pained expression as he gazed helplessly at the window. "Iruk--"

"You can't talk to him, Naru."

Naruto blinked, snapping her head towards the window to where her current sensei maintained his vigil. "Kakashi-sensei...?" A frown made its way across her face. "Look, I know he's probably busy what with all that's going on, but this is important! I really gotta talk to him! Honest!"

"Naru," Kakashi met her eyes with his own, the look in his eye making him look very old. "The Hokage is dead."

The small blonde jerked, her face turning white in shock as the Jounin's words slowly trickled to her brain. "Wh-what...?"

Sakura stepped out of the door leading to the apartment above her family's bookstore, pausing only to lock the door. She spared a quick glance at the overcast sky above before turning her attention back down to Earth. Pale green eyes widened in surprise when they fell on the short blonde leaning against the wall across the street. "Naruto...?"
Back facing her, the other kunoichi of Team 7 tensed, swiped at her face with a black sleeve before turning to face her. Though she had been released from the hospital the day before, she still bore the signs of her ordeal; her right cheek was concealed beneath a large, square bandage and her hitai-ate had been ousted from its spot on her forehead by the bandages that were barely visible under thick blonde bags. The leaf insignia now hung around her neck temporarily, barely visible from within the high collared-funeral robes she wore.

Sakura noted that the blonde had opted to wear the kunoichi version of the outfit - a long sleeved tunic top and skirt that stopped about mid-thigh. She’d also taken some of her styling tips to heart; though her bangs hung down over her forehead concealing most of her bandages from view, the long locks that usually framed her face were tucked back behind her ears with two plain black clips. Their eyes met and the pink-haired kunoichi was dismayed to note how red-rimmed and puffy the blonde's usually vibrant eyes were.

Naruto glanced away with a sad smile, her eyes falling on the path that would lead them to the Hokage tower. "You ready to go, Neechan?"

Sakura nodded quietly and together the two proceeded down the street side by side. They walked in silence, stopping when they came to an intersection. Waiting a few moments, they looked up at the sound of footsteps approaching from their right. Turning towards the source, they spotted Sasuke also donned in his funeral black. He passed them without a word, walking a few meters before coming to a stop. Waiting for them to catch up, he continued his trek to the tower, his two teammates flanking him on either side.

ooo

The eulogy given was brief, but beautifully elegiac. Nearly the entire village was present in the tower courtyard. Their expressions sad and weary, hearts heavy with the pain of those lost, but each person felt relieved that the danger had passed. The Hokage's old teammates, Mitokado Homura and Utatane Koharu had spoken a few words, honoring those who had fallen before stepping down from the podium to allow all the ninja present to approach the large alter to pay their respects.

Naruto watched the line progress, her blue eyes focused on that of the photograph situated at the center of the funeral shrine. 'Ojiisan...' Images of her moments with him flashed through her mind, her heart clenching at the thought that they were all she had left of him. "Why... why did he hafta die...?"

"He carried out his duty as the leader of our village..." Blue eyes fell on that of her old Academy teacher, down on his knees consoling a distraught Konohamaru. The little boy turned his face into the crook of his arm to hide the tears streaming his ruddy cheeks. The teaching gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. Their gazes meeting over his head, Naru could see the same pain she felt mirrored in his dark depths. "He'll be missed by all of us to be sure, but we must try to take comfort in the fact that he saved us - not just out of duty, but out of love."

"Love..." Naruto glanced at Konohamaru briefly. He and the Hokage had been related by blood, but a part of her wondered if the boy felt his loss as keenly as she did. After all, for the longest time, the old man had been the only family she had.

~ "It's my job to help everyone and make sure they're safe and happy," ~ he had told her all those years ago.
'He died...' she thought to herself, trying vainly to ignoring the painful knot forming in her throat. Crying wouldn't do any good; it certainly wouldn't bring the old man back. 'So that everyone else could live.' According to Iruka, the Hokage had been the one to finally correct the damage done to her Seal. She felt no small amount of guilt for this, but did not want to consider the alternative. Could she really bring herself to deny the sacrifice he had made on her behalf?

~ "It's strange..." ~ her Dream Haku had murmured. ~ "People seem to fight so much harder when loved one's lives are at stake..." ~

To give up one's life to ensure the lives of those important to you. Hadn't that been what she had told Gaara? Hadn't she vowed to do whatever it took to protect her precious people? 'I wonder...' Naruto brought her hand to her stomach, clenching at the material of her shirt. 'Was that how you felt... Yondaime-sama?'

So lost in her own thoughts was she that she didn't notice the numerous gazes focused on her in confusion and sympathy.

ooo

Standing alone in the quiet dojo, Hyuuga Neji ran through the steps of the kata slowly and fluidly, testing his body for any lingering traces of pain and weakness remaining from the injuries sustained during the exams. Executing a sharp low jab to his invisible opponent's abdomen, he winced and let out a sharp gasp when his arm protested the movement. He paused, shifting out of his stance to rotate his shoulder gingerly. Pale eyes closed in slight resignation. 'Still not completely healed...' His mind went back to his fight, focusing on his blonde opponent almost instantly.

Her will... her determination to get up and keep fighting despite the odds being so highly stacked against her... 'I can't believe she's so strong...' he thought in quiet wonder. 'What is it that makes her so--'

An approaching chakra signature halted his thoughts, and Neji waited silently as the paper shoji quietly slid open to reveal Hinata with a small tray in her hands. Her pale eyes focused on him, widening slightly at the sight of him standing still. "A-are you all right, Neji-niisan?" she asked.

After everything he had done to her she still referred to him as 'brother'? "I'm fine," he murmured, moving his gaze to the far wall.

The heiress paused a moment before approaching nervously. "I..." She gulped, the tray in her hand rattling slightly with the tremors of her hands. "I brought you some t-tea..."

Neji fought not to scowl; it was he who was supposed to be the servant, not her! Pale eyes glanced at her briefly before shifting away again. "I didn't ask for any."

The younger girl lowered her gaze, biting her lip in indecision. "I-I-I know..." she stammered. Nevertheless, she set the tray down and began setting up the delicate china in preparation. Once finished, she glanced up and gasped in alarm at the small amount of distance now between she and her elder cousin. Calculating eyes focused on her and she flinched.

"You're afraid of me." Hinata's lack of response was answer enough. Neji's eyes narrowed slightly. "So why are you doing this?"
The young genin paused, wringing her hands timidly. She gazed back up at him, her eyes bright despite her nervousness. "B-because I don't want to be."

Neji paused, his expression turning thoughtful as he recounted a certain blonde's words.

~ "I know Hinata is a good person... A good person who didn't deserve to be nearly murdered by the likes of you!" ~

Her words were true and Neji knew it. How else would the girl be so willing to forgive his trespasses against her? "I nearly killed you." he murmured.

"You were hurt and angry..." Hinata bowed her head, her bangs obscuring her eyes. "I am so sorry..." Hinata continued, clenching her hands in her lap. "Because I was weak, your father was taken from you..." Tears welled up in her moon-like eyes. "Hizashi-ojisan is dead because of me..."

Images of his uncle, along with his father's letter flashed before his eyes and Neji let out a sharp gasp. With a jolt he realized Hinata was far stronger than he had given her credit. He had lamented his lot in life as a Branch Member of their house, but he hadn't realized until now that Hinata's life had been just as difficult as his. Eve as a Main Branch member, the heiress of the clan had looked down upon by her family for her timidity and weakness. However she had persevered, and despite his ill treatment of her, had always shown him kindness and respect. In Hinata's eyes, Neji had *never* been an inferior servant.

He had always been *'Neji-niisan'.*

"Don't blame yourself," he murmured softly. It was Hinata's turn to glance in surprise as he knelt down in front of her. "I should not have blamed you." Placing his hands down on the ground, he bowed his head down low to the floor in penitence. "Forgive me, Hinata-sama."

Silence passed over the dojo until the young Hyuuga heiress leaned forward, touching one of his hands gently. "It's all right, Neji-niisan... there is nothing to forgive..."

The Hyuuga prodigy gasped again. "Hinata-sama...?"

Her answering smile was still timid, but no less sincere. "W-would you like any tea...?" she asked. "It's Jasmine..."

Neji stared at her, in awe of what had just occurred. There was a saying he recalled that claimed it took great strength to forgive someone. Hinata had done so easily - could he as well?

~ "People get so caught by life that they only believe what they want to..." ~

He remembered how the blonde's words had spurred his cousin to fight. Or perhaps she'd been strong all along and needed someone to remind her?

~ "You're nothing like those stuffed shirts in the Main Branch! Prove to him that you're your own person!" ~

He paused, thoughtful. Hinata had overcome her fear and faced him despite the fact she knew she would lose.
"If I got the power to change things for the better, why should I sit back and do nothing? 'Cuz it's fate?" ~

Perhaps in that aspect, Hinata was stronger than him? It was now up to him to make sure that strength made itself known in all aspects of her personality. It was time he took his role as her protector seriously. 'I will atone for the wrong I have done you, Hinata-sama.' His thoughts trailed off as he noticed the little bird sitting by the open window. Noticing his eyes upon it, it fluttered its wings and flew away. 'I suppose this is the path I have decided for myself... Father...'

"Neji-niisan?" Hinata was studying him carefully, her eyes full of concern. "Are you all right?"

Thinking back to that bird, a smirking blonde flashed through his mind and he smiled softly, nodding. "I will be."

She smiled back at him.

The two sat and sipped their tea quietly before the older boy broke the silence again, his expression thoughtful. "Hinata-sama... there is something I wish to ask you."

Hinata looked up. "Yes?"

"What do you know... about Uzumaki Naru?"

End Chapter 21a
Chapter 21b: What an Interesting Girl...

Chapter Summary

"You're not giving me any straight answers!" he exclaimed.

The blonde only grinned. "I never said I would."

Chapter 21b:

"Aaahhh... Haachoo!"

Sasuke scowled, leaning away from the snuffling blonde beside him. Considering she'd been released from the hospital that morning, the Uchiha felt that he had been more than patient with the girl. Enough was enough! "Moron..." he grumbled irritably. "Sneeze on me one more time..."

"Sorry! I can't help it!" Naruto exclaimed, rubbing her nose sheepishly. "Seems like everyone's talkin' about me today!"

He scoffed, glancing away. "Yeah, right..."

Naruto gave him a look, quirking an eyebrow in confusion. 'Sheesh, who spit in his miso this morning?' However, pegging his attitude part of his normal surly fare, she turned her attention back to her other two teammates. Sakura and Kakashi stood at the other edge of the bridge that served as Team 7's meeting area, giving her mission report. She had Sasuke had yet to be debriefed and were still waiting their turn.

Resting her chin in her hand as she watched them, Naruto let out an exasperated sigh. "Man, Sakura-nee-chan's sure takin' forever!" she exclaimed, ignoring the dark eyes that slanted her way before turning elsewhere. "Does she *always* have to give such thorough reports?"

A smirk threatened the spread across Sasuke's face as he took in the no-nonsense expression on the pink-haired kunoichi's face. It seemed she had gotten stronger since their early days as a genin squad; or more serious about her role as a ninja, at least. Knowing the blonde was expecting him to make some sort of response, he decided not to disappoint. "Maybe you should follow her example."

She stuck out her tongue immaturity. "My reports are just fine, thanks." Sasuke rolled his eyes. "What's there to tell, really?" she continued. "Gaara changed into a freakish sand monster and we beat him. End of story."

Sasuke turned to her, gawking. 'Is she serious?' There was no sarcasm or mockery in her tone, but the Uchiha was skeptical nonetheless. "What do you mean 'we'?"

Blue eyes blinked at him. "You fought him, too, y'know."
'And barely did any damage.' Sasuke frowned, bits from the fight flashing before his mind's eye. 'If you hadn't stepped in...' Mood immediately souring, his dark eyes sought on that of his other female teammate, recalling Sakura jumping in front of him in attempts to shield him from Gaara's attack. 'I couldn't even save her....'

Naruto blinked again. 'What're you talkin' about?' she exclaimed. 'You did save Sakura!'

Sasuke scowled darkly. 'You were the one who stopped Gaara.'

"Yeah and totally wiped out all my chakra." the blonde replied, totally oblivious to the storm cloud brewing over her dark haired teammate. "If you hadn't acted, Neechan'd be a smear on the forest floor right now!"

He stared at her, his body trembling in anger. "I don't need to be patronized by you--"

The blonde froze, staring at him in surprise. "I'm not--"

"I told you that I didn't need your help!" he hissed. "So leave me alone!" Not allowing her any time to make a rebuttal, he turned and dashed away leaving a stunned blonde behind him.

"Sasuke..." Blue eyes blinked in confusion. "What the hell..." Glancing at her two remaining teammates briefly, she took off after him.

ooo

"...and that's all I remember, Sensei," Sakura finished, summing up her recount of her involvement in their mission. "The rest you'll hafta get from Sasuke-kun and Naru--" She turned towards the bridge railing, eyes widening when she realized her teammates were nowhere in sight. "Wha...?"

Kakashi followed her gaze, a frown visible in his eye. 'Damn...'

ooo

"SASUKE?!" Naruto searched the area, her eyes dark in confusion and frustration. Her dark haired teammate was nowhere in sight. 'Where the heck did he go? And why did he run off anyway?' She paused, attempting to track his scent. However, there were so many scents in the crowded street what with the rennovations going on that to Naruto it was all just a jumbled mess. 'Damn it... I can't make any sense of it.' For a brief moment Naruto wished she were an Inuzuka.

She paused in her search, scratching her head in confusion at her teammate's strange behavior. Sasuke was no stranger to mood swings, but she couldn't figure out where things had gone wrong. The two of them had been getting along - or at least she had thought so. Was it something she had said? Deciding to give up the ghost, Naruto turned to make her trek back to the bridge only to be bumped into from behind by a smaller body.

"Hey? What?!"

"Boss!"

Naruto glanced downward, eyes falling on the familiar form of her first self-proclaimed rival. "Konohamaru-kun!" A grin settled over her face before diminishing slightly. "Um... how ya' doin'...?"
The boy flushed as he tried to look cool. "Good... you?"

"Yeah... Good..." A silence settle over the pair before Naruto spoke again. "Um, hey... wanna go get some ramen?"

The younger boy's eyes lit up. "Sure!"

Ruffling his hair affectionately, Naruto steered him in the direction of Ichiraku.

ooo

On the other side of the village, Sasuke walked through the streets in an angry fog. 'Why...' he thought savagely to himself. 'Why...?!' In his mind, Naruto was dropping down out of the trees, knocking Gaara aside with a powerful kick to the head. 'Why...?' The blonde had summoned multiple clones, converging on the redhead like a tidal wave. Sasuke stopped in the middle of the street, his fists clenched at his sides. 'Why does she have to be the one...?' He remembered her standing atop that gigantic Summon, and the expression of triumph on her face. 'Why is she the one stronger than me...?'

Those steely blue eyes flashed before his eyes, and the words she had spoken echoed in his head. ~ "...I will always do whatever it takes to keep them safe and happy... Even if it means I have to kill you!" ~

'She faced down an unbeatable enemy... and won... But I...!' His brother face appeared before him once more and Sasuke had to fight down the sick rush of anger.

~ "Cling to your pathetic life..." ~

'Itachi...' His thoughts were halted as he sensed the presence of another ninja appear behind him. He turned, his eyes narrowing on the pale gray eyes focused on him.

Hyuuga Neji studied him, his face void of emotion. "Uchiha."

Sasuke fixed his expression to mirror his. "Hyuuga." The two stared each other down. "What do you want?"

Neji was silent a moment. "Where can I find your teammate?"

Sasuke tensed, eyeing him suspiciously. "Which one?"

"Uzumaki."

Though he inwardly felt a sense of relief that Sakura was not the subject of the older Number One Rookie's search, the fact that Naruto was did not make him feel any better. "What's your business with her?" His words catching up to him, he almost started in surprise at the tiny sliver of protectiveness he felt towards his teammate. He recalled a similar feeling during his first fight with Gaara.

Despite the Sharingan now focused on him, the Hyuuga did not waver. "Nothing that concerns you," he replied smoothly.
A scowl spread across the Uchiha's face. "Then why should I tell you?"

Studying the tenseness in the other boy's posture, Neji hid a knowing smirk. "You don't know where she is." Sasuke twitched. "Then I have no use for you."

Sasuke's scowl deepened in ferocity.

Number one rookie indeed... A full blown smirk spreading across his face, Neji turned and walked away, leaving a furious Uchiha in his wake.

ooo

"Ooh... yes... sooo lovely..." Jiraiya peered through his telescope, allowing a lecherous grin to spread across his flushed face. "Just the type of pose I need for my next book..."

"Up to the same old tricks, ne... Jiraiya-kun...?"

The Toad Sage paused, glancing over at his shoulder at the figures approaching him from the other side of the rooftop. At the sight of the elder woman with pale, sightless blue eyes, his eyes lit up in recognition. He stood up, grinning mischievously. "Well now, Miyako-sama, how nice of you to honor me with a visit." He paused, his grin widening. "I must say you're looking very lovely today..." He paused, winking at the two female Chuunin acting as her escorts. "As are your two companions." They rolled their eyes before tittering amongst each other.

The Council member/ex-ninja chuckled, a smirk spreading across her face. "And you would be an expert, I imagine." she chuckled.

"You're too kind..." The Sannin bowed with a flourish. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"As you know," the blind woman replied. "I am spokesperson for the Council. As such it is my duty to inform you that your presence is requested to discuss a matter of great importance."

"A matter of great importance', eh?" Jiraiya's eyes narrowed slightly. Straightening his shoulders, he fixed a mischievous smirk on his tattooed face. "Well then, I s'pose we shouldn't keep them waiting!"

If she could sense the tension in his posture, she made no mention of it. Inclining her head gracefully, Iwano turned back towards her two escorts. "Right this way, Jiraiya-kun."

As he followed behind her, a frown made its way to his face once more. 'Just what the heck is gonna happen now?'

ooo

"Homura-sama, Koharu-sama, good to see you two. It's been so long..."

The female council woman gave the Sennin a measuring look. "It would not be if you spent more time within Konoha's walls, Jiraiya," she admonished lightly.

"You can't expect the Mountain Sage to remain within civilization for long," he exclaimed, sweeping his bangs over his shoulder exultantly. "I'm a master of the wilderness, a wandering spirit in tune with nature, a--"
"A powerful force this village needs present to maintain our standing with the other Shinobi Nations," Homura interjected. "Sarutobi is gone and our village is leaderless. Though we have received Sunagakure's unconditional surrender, we cannot expect to maintain peace for long--"

Jiraiya blinked in confusion. "Hold on, Sunagakure surrendereed?"

The two council members nodded.

"A group of scouters discovered the remains of the true Yondaime Kazekage and his entourage just beyond the borders of Hi no Kuni," Koharu answered, her expression grim. "They never even made it out of their country to witness the Exams."

"Orochimaru..."

"Indeed," Homura replied. "Sunagakure realized they had been betrayed by Orochimaru and as such have surrendered themselves to us. We have signed a treaty swearing an alliance between our two villages, but there is no telling how long that peace will last."

"I seriously doubt they'll try anything," Jiraiya replied. "Certainly not while they're Kage-less as well."

"But that's not to say Otogakure won't," Koharu interceded. "Or another village. Do not forget we are still at odds with Iwagakure."

The Sannin frowned darkly before glancing away. "That's why I have my spy network set up," he replied. "My contacts keep me informed of anything going on that might put the village at risk."

"This is all well and good," Koharu sighed. "But we have a far greater use for you here in the village."

The white haired ninja turned back to them, frowning once more. A foreboding feeling settled in his chest. "And that would be...?"

"Jiraiya," Homura answered. "It is the decision of the Council that you become the next Hokage."

A long silence followed his statement, only to be broken by the sound of laughter.

Slapping his knee jovially, Jiraiya met their disapproving frowns with tears of mirth. "You... You're joking, right?"

"Certainly not!" Koharu huffed. "You are the strongest ninja in this village! You are a Sannin - surely there is no one better suited for the job!"

"Actually, that's not true," The two council members blinked in surprise. Jiraiya's expression turned solemn. "You're forgetting that I'm not the only Sannin capable of the job."

Homura paused, looking thoughtful.

"This may be so," Koharu's wrinkled face darkened in concern. "But no one knows where she is---"
"Spy Network," Jiraiya cut in calmly. "It shouldn't be that hard to find her."

The old woman scrunched her face up only to sigh in resignation. "Very well. We shall dispatch an ANBU team at once to--"

The white-haired ninja shook his head. "That won't do any good and you know it. The old man sent lotsa teams out to convince her to come back and none of them were ever successful." His face darkened briefly before he continued. "I'm the only one who has a chance of getting through to her."

"Then we will send ANBU to escort you."

Jiraiya chuckled. "Worried I'll skip out on you?" Koharu's expression plainly said 'yes' while Homaru's remained blank. "Keep the ANBU where they're really needed - here protecting this village. There's only one person that needs to come along with me. She's all I'll need to make the old girl see reason."

Koharu frowned in confusion. A look from the old nin beside her had her eyes lighting up in understanding. Turning back to Jiraiya, her expression turned solemn once more. "Suppose we grant your request--"

"I was going to do it anyway, but thanks."

Homura coughed into his hand, though he may have been trying to smother a laugh. His female companion shot him a glare nonetheless. "As I was saying," she continued. "Suppose we grant your request - how can you be certain this person will help you succeed?"

"I'm the Legendary Gama Sennin! How could I be wrong?" At the old woman's thunderous expression, he chuckled easily. Ah, if only she could have been as easy going as Miyako. What a sense of humor that woman had! Koharu, however... Well, he'd always enjoyed ruffling the old goose's feathers every once in a while. He wondered if her aim was as sharp as it used to be. Catching the look that Homura was giving that indicated he was five seconds from finding out, his grin widened once more. "Well, have you ever met her?"

Both council members blinked, giving him a stunned shake of the head.

Jiraiya's grin turned into a knowing smirk. "So far as I'm concerned," he replied. "I doubt there's anything that kid can't do once she puts her mind to it."

Homura and Koharu exchanged glances before giving an assenting nod.

"Very well."

ooo

Naruto let out another loud sneeze, stumbling back a few paces from the intensity. "Damn it!"

Konohamaru glanced up at her, his expression curious. "Comin' down with a cold, Boss?" he asked.

She turned to him, a grin spreading across her face once more. "Nah," she answered. "And even if
I was, it's nothin' a bowl of ramen can't fix!"

The younger boy grinned back at her.

"Konohamaru-kuuun!"

The pair looked up, spotting a small red head running towards them in the distance. A bespectacled boy trailed behind her, puffing on his inhaler all the way.

The Hokage's grandson blinked. "Moegi?"

The young girl slid to a stop in front of him, gasping lightly. "Didja forget?" she exclaimed between breaths. "We're supposed to head over to the Academy today!"

"Ah! Oh yeah!"

The blonde genin regarded the younger children in confusion. "Classes have started up again already?" she asked.

Konohamaru shook his head. "No, we were helpin' with reconstruction." he answered. "Me, Moegi, and Udon have class room duty." His expression turned contrite. "You don't mind, do ya', Boss?"

Naruto studied him for a brief second. He seemed to be doing all right, she told herself. Perhaps being with his friends would do him some good. Shaking her head with a grin, she ruffled the boy's hair, earning a blush and a half-hearted push. "You go on ahead," She reached into her pocket, handing him a ramen voucher. "Save it for later, 'kay?"

His blush deepening, Konohamaru gave her a vigorous nod. "Thanks!"

"I can't have my rival slacking off, so you take care now, Konohamaru, okay?"

"I will, Boss!" He turned and jogged off with his two partners in crime, waving as he went. "See ya later!"

Waving as he vanished out of sight, Naruto let a grin spread across her face as she returned her mind to the task at hand. "Now about that ramen..." Folding her hands behind her head, she turned to resume her trek down the street when she sensed yet another presence behind her. She paused waiting for the figure to make themself known.

He dropped down out of a neighboring tree, his pale eyes focusing on her intently. Straightening, he strode up to her, inclining his head just slightly in acknowledgement. "Uzumaki."

If she were surprised to see him, her expression certainly didn't show it. Turning to face him fully, she allowed a grin to spread across her face. "Hey there, Neji!"

The Hyuuga prodigy blinked, surprised by the absolute lack of hostility in her tone. 'You'd think she was almost happy to see me...' He didn't know what to think about that. Filing the thought away to digest later, Neji turned his attention back to the task at hand. "I wish to speak with you."

She blinked. "Isn't... that what we're doing now...?"
The older boy's left brow ticked slightly. He closed his eyes, letting out a quiet breath before focusing his sharp gaze upon her once more. "There are questions I would like to ask you."

Questions...? Naruto frowned slightly. "But I'm on my way to Ichiraku..." She turned her blue gaze down the street, near-agonizing over the fact that a steaming bowl of noodles was only a few scant blocks away. Perhaps if she just--

"Ich... raku...?"

Naruto froze, snapping her head back to face him with lightning quickness. The older genin was startled by the sudden seriousness in her gaze, but kept his expression nonchalant. When the blonde finally spoke, it was in a tone of quiet horror. "You actually mean to tell me... you don't know what Ichiraku is...?" His silence was answer enough. With speed that far surpassed that used in their bout during the Exams, Naruto grasped his hand and began tugging him quickly down the street. "Hurry! You have to come with me!"

Startled, surprised, and just a tad bit confused, Neji allowed himself to be lead. Perhaps this way he would finally get some answers to his questions.

ooo

Two figures donned in black robes stood at on a cliffside at the edge of the forest, their gazes focused on the bustling little village below. The taller of the pair leaned forward, surveying the view with an amused snort.

"This is it...?" He chuckled in disbelief, a smirk barely visible within the shadows of his wide-brimmed straw hat. "Not what I expected of the Great Village Hidden Within the Leaves... The place is a dump."

His companion was silent a moment. "It didn't always look like this," he said finally. "It survived an invasion."

The taller figure paused, thoughtful. "Oh, I forgot..." He turned to the shorter figure. "This was your hometown, wasn't it?" The figure didn't respond. 'Feelin' a little nostalgia?"

"No." The figure turned, heading back into the shadows of the forest. "Come. We have work to do."

The taller figure chuckled again, following after him. "Right."

ooo

Kakashi touched down on the windowsill of Naruto's apartment, frustration visible in his eye. What were the two of them thinking taking off right in the middle of a debriefing?

'Perhaps you should consider yourself lucky...' a voice in his head intoned. 'This way you don't have to tell her what you've been putting off telling her ever since you met her.' The Jounin flinched inwardly. It was true that he'd been avoiding it, but the time for hesitation was now passed. Knowing that a serious discussion with the blonde was inevitable, the Jounin leaned forward to disable the traps set up by the blonde when a voice cut him off.

"The kid's not there," A gray eye shot upwards, spotting the white haired Sannin staring down at
him from the building rooftop. "I already checked."

Leaping upwards and touching down beside him, Kakashi regarded the other ninja in confusion. "You're still in town?"

"I'll be leaving soon," he replied. "I just have something that I need to take care of first."

"I see..." Kakashi recalled their discussion regarding the Yondaime's seal. "And what does this have to do with Naruto?"

"She'll be comin' with me." Jiraiya answered. "So I can continue her training."

"What?" Kakashi felt as though he'd been kicked in the gut. "What do you mean continue?"

The Sannin's eyes sharpened slightly. "Surely you don't think she learned how to beat that Sand Kid on her own," he scoffed. "She's good, but not that good... At least not yet."

"Why?"

"Why?" Jiraiya paused, his eyes narrowing. There were so many answers he could give to that question. He decided upon the most obvious. "Because there's no way she would have stood a chance against a Hyuuga with just Ebisu as her teacher."

There was no mistaking the accusation in his tone. It took years of training for the younger ninja not to flinch guiltily. "I had orders," he exclaimed. "Sasuke needed--"

"I know all about the Uchiha and his little problem," Jiraiya snapped tiredly. As he'd never had the (mis)fortune of meeting the boy face to face, the Sannin could only imagine what he was like. Unfortunately, that imagination brought up a lot of memories - none of which were good. He focused his attention back on the younger ninja, a scowl fixed to his face. "He and Orochimaru are the least of my problems."

Kakashi blinked. "How's that?"

Jiraiya sighed. "I've been monitoring the Snake's movements ever since he abandoned the village," he explained. "He tried to stay under the radar for a time, but after a few years he resurfaced and joined a criminal organization that calls itself the Akatsuki."

"Akatsuki..."

Nodding, the Sannin continued, "Their group is made up primarily of 9 members - all nukenin from varying villages. Their goal was pretty much what most nukenin want - more power." He paused, frowning. "But what's worrisome is what they go after to get it."

The Copy ninja stared at him, his body tensing. "What?"

"Bijuu."

His eye widened. "Naruto..."

Jiraiya's frown deepened, the furrowing of his brows a sure sign of his concern. "The Kyuubi is the strongest of all 9 Bijuu and is in possession of no doubt limitless chakra..." he murmured. "My
guess is that's why Orochimaru tried capturing it before."

"But then why...?" Kakashi trailed off, studying his expression.

"Whether he failed or held off deliberately, I've no idea..." Jiraiya answered. "But after the Fox was sealed he left the organization and went underground again. However, the Akatsuki are still after Kyuubi, and have no doubt sent agents to recover it."

Kakashi tensed, a frown visible in his eye. "Do you know who?" he asked.

"I don't know who all make up their ranks, but I have a few guesses," Jiraiya ventured. "For example, I know for absolute certain that Itachi is a member." The Jounin in front of him remained silent, a narrowing of his eye the only sign of his displeasure. The Sannin continued on, "As a Jinchuuriki, Naruto's life will be difficult. She needs to become stronger and she just can't do that here."

'Because I haven't been teaching her properly...' Kakashi clenched his fists at his sides. "I understand..." He closed his eye, envisioning a blue eyed blonde grinning up at him. "It's just..." He could feel Jiraiya's gaze fall on him and he sighed heavily. "I was supposed to protect her..."

Jiraiya stared at him for a few moments before turning away, his expression making him look ten years older. "Because of the fox," he murmured quietly. "Naru's gotta learn how to protect herself..."

ooo

"Awww... this is ridiculous!" Naruto rubbed at her nose, pouting in frustration. "What is it today?"

Neji remained silent, studying her quietly from the stool beside hers.

After a few moments, Teuchi appeared in front of them, a wide grin spreading across his face at the sight of the young blonde. "Weelll, if it isn't Naruto! Long time no see!"

"Hey, Ichiraku-jiijii!" She waved at the young brunette draining noodles off to the side. "Hi, Ayame-neesan!"

"Hello, Naru-chan! Who's your friend?"

"This is Neji," Naruto answered with a grin. The Hyuuga bowed his head slightly before settling pale eyes on her in curiosity. "We met at the Exams."

"Ahh, the Exams. How'd you do?" Teuchi asked.

"Pretty good." the blonde answered. "Can't wait to hear the results. Ah - can I get chicken an' shrimp and a miso ramen for Neji?"

"Coming right up!" Ayame chirped as she prepped their orders. A few minutes later she came back, setting down two steaming bowls of noodles.

Letting out a squeal of delight, Naruto split her chopsticks, yipping out a quick, "Itadakimasu!" before digging right in.
Breaking his chopsticks at a much slower pace, Neji sampled a bit of the dish in front of him, brows furrowing in concentration. "It's salty," he replied after several moments. Nonetheless, he moved forward for another helping.

Pausing between bites, Naruto let out a moan of pleasure. "But it's soooo good!"

Willing to admit - at least to himself - that she was right, Neji resumed his meal in silence, only pausing awkwardly when it seemed as though the blond were enjoying her meal a bit *too* much. Once he finished, he inclined his head in thanks to the chef, muttered a soft 'gochisousama', and turned his attention back to the blonde once more. "Uzumaki--"

Naruto paused, blinking at him curiously. "You can call me Naruto, you know," she replied. "No need to be so stiff and formal."

He closed his eyes. "I was being polite."

Polite? A confused smile spread across her face. "Well, that's nice of you, I guess, but since I've been calling you Neji from day one, it only seems fair."

Recalling there had been a -teme attached at the end, Neji conceded with a nod. "Fine then... Naruto," The blonde smirked and rolled her eyes. "I have questions I want to ask you."

She paused, a stab of apprehension running through her briefly. 'Questions...?" "You're not mad about our fight, are you?"

"No..." He paused, slightly surprised to realize he meant it. "You beat me fair and square." He inclined his head slightly and the blonde blinked in confusion once again. "It just shows that I have to train harder."

The blonde let out a noncommittal sound, turning to sip at her broth with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

Neji gazed at her, pale gray eyes intense as they studied her. He recalled his conversation with his cousin regarding the blonde, remembering the absolute adoration and admiration the heiress had for the rough and tumble blonde. He could only imagine what a shock it must have been to find out she was a girl. All the same, the blonde had inspired in his meek and timid cousin more spirit and courage than he could ever recall.

'Just what are you...?' he wondered for what seemed like the millionth time. To keep getting back up after being beaten so mercilessly... how could anyone have a will that strong? He could still hear her words echoing in his head, and he remembered feeling as though he should believe in them just as wholeheartedly as she did. "I've never seen anyone fight like that."

Blue eyes met his before glancing away casually. "There's a first time for everything, ne?"

He frowned thoughtfully. He knew for certain that the blonde was unique. However, he just didn't know why. What was it about her that was so inspiring? Hinata had admitted that the two of them weren't very well acquainted, and yet Naruto had vowed to avenge her defeat. More so than that,
she had succeeded.

'And she's even seemed to have rubbed off on Lee...' he murmured to himself. He remembered the devastation and despair Lee seemed to exude when he was told that his odds of remaining a ninja were slim. However, according to Gai-sensei, one encounter with the blonde seemed to have brought him back to his normal - if not annoying - spirits again.

"Where did it come from?" The blonde glanced back over at him and he realized that he had spoken aloud. "That strength of yours... How is it that you're so strong... Everyone thinks of you as a failure..."

Naruto rested her chin in her palm, giving him a thoughtful look. "Makes you wonder, huh?"

He met her gaze head on. "How did you beat me?"

"You wanted to win, ne?" the blonde replied. "Well, I just wasn't going to lose."

Frustrated with her roundabout answers, Neji pounded the table with a fist, startling the two ramen shop proprietors. "You're not giving me any straight answers!" he exclaimed.

The blonde only grinned. "I never said I would."

Opening his mouth to demand a straight answer, Neji was cut off by a small cloud of smoke that appeared on the table in front of them. After a few seconds it parted, leaving a small red toad in its wake.

"Yo, Neechan!"

Naruto's eyes lit up in surprise. "Gamakichi-kun!" She grasped the toad in a brief hug before setting him back down on the table. "What are you doin' here?"

"You're not the only one who can call us, y'know." the Summon replied with a smirk. "Did you forget that?"

"Aww... lemme guess... Ero-sennin?"

"Right-o! He wants to talk to ya right away!"

Neji stared at the interaction between the two, his eyes wide in astonishment. 'She can summon...?'

Gamakichi glanced at the boy before turning back to Naruto, his expression curious. He jabbed a webbed finger in his direction. "What'sa matter with him?" he asked. "Hasn't he ever seen a toad before?"

Naruto glanced up at Neji before allowing an amused grin to spread across her face. "Prob'ly never a talking one." Jumping down from her stool, she began searching around her pockets for a voucher. She took off her jacket, shaking it upside down only to groan in frustration when it yielded no results. "Oh man... where'd it go... Oh yeah! I gave Konohamaru my other one... Crap..."

Snapping out of his stupor at the blonde's flurried movements, he studied the form fitting black vest she still wore before focusing his attention elsewhere. A slight cough from Teuchi indicated
the action hadn't gone unnoticed; he pretended not to hear. Instead, he reached into his pocket, setting down enough money to cover both meals.

"Eh... Neji... what...?"

He turned to her, a small smirk rising across his face at her stunned expression. Despite her ability to irritate him easily, Neji had to admit that Uzumaki Naru was certainly an amusing character. It would definitely be interesting trying to figure her out. "If you're needed elsewhere," he replied calmly. "We'll just have to finish our conversation some other time."

Ayame blinked and Teuchi raised an eyebrow.

Naruto tilted her head to the side, confusion evident in her expression. 'Is he saying he wants to hang out again....?' "Um... okay..." Donning her jacket once more, she plucked Gamakichi off the bar. Studying him a few seconds more, she allowed a grin to spread across her face. "Bye bye, Ichiraku-jiji, Ayame-neesan!" She dashed off, waving as she went. "See ya later, Neji!"

"Bye, Naru-chan!" Ayame called after her.

Neji watched her go as he stepped down from his seat, pausing only when he noticed the old ramen chef studying him intently. He raised a single brow in question.

Teuchi was silent a few moments more as he regarded him before finally replying, "So, are you and Naru..." He raised his hand, extending his pinky finger meaningfully.

Years of training went out the window as the Hyuuga prodigy and last year's #1 Rookie gawked in surprise. "Wha...?"

"Father," Ayame batted the old man's arm in admonishment. "Don't tease... He probably hasn't gotten the chance to ask her yet." She turned her attention back to Neji, smiling kindly. "Am I right?"

Neji only blinked helplessly. One thing he had learned about the blonde for certain was that those she consorted with were just about as confusing as she was!

ooo

"Aaachoo!"

Gamakichi glanced up at the blonde carrying him, his beady eyes darkening in concern. "Comin' down with a cold, Neechan!"

The blonde stopped, her hair bristling in fury. "AARRRGHH!! I wish everybody would stop talkin' about me!!"

~ End Chapter 21b
Chapter 22: Danger

Naruto stared up at the white haired ninja grinning down at her. Gamakichi had explained to her what Jiraiya had in mind, but in all reality she had believed to be it a big joke. Even now she was still having a hard time grasping it. "So, let me get this straight," she murmured, schooling her face into a bland expression. "You want me to go on a trip... with you...?"

Jiraiya twitched inwardly at the skepticism in her tone, but maintained his aloof grin. "That's right," he answered. "There's someone I need to find. An old friend of mine."

"An old friend...?" The blonde paused, quirking an eyebrow slightly. "Lemme guess, she dumped you and went into hiding."

The old ninja gave her a scowl of annoyance before recovering with another devil-may-care grin. "You and your active imagination." He gave a hearty chuckle and Naruto merely rolled her eyes. Reaching forward, he locked his arms around the young girl's shoulders, ruffling her hair with a noogie. Smirking at her cry of outrage, he continued on, "Don't you get it? This is a remarkable woman! One unlike any other!"

"Why should I care?" Naruto exclaimed as she struggled her way out of his grasp. "Besides, I'm needed here in the village!"

Jiraiya blinked at her. "Doing what?"

She paused, looking mildly affronted before closing her eyes deep in thought. After a few moments of coming up within nothing, she flushed in embarrassment, scuffing her shoes in the dirt. "Well... I'm sure there's something I need to be doing... My team is here - I can't just run off and leave them!"

The sage studied her, struggling to keep a smile from his face. It was comforting to know that she held such loyalty for her teammates and village. He paused slightly... 'But still...'

"After all... we haven't trained together in forever... what with the Exams, that quick stay in the hospital... and the old man's funeral... Anyhow, I'm not going."

Sighing, Jiraiya tried another tactic. "C'mon, kid, you're passing up a golden opportunity here!" When the blonde fixed him with a look of genuine confusion, he twitched slightly. "One on one time with the Super-wise sage of Myoboku-zan--" He paused, striking one of his gallant poses. "Jiraiya of the Legendary Three! And the chance to partake upon an amazing adventure!"

He leaned forward, smirking slightly. "I bet Sasuke wouldn't pass it up."

Naruto stilled, her expression darkening just slightly. "I'm not Sasuke."

'We... I guess they don't call her unpredictable for nothing...' Jiraiya let out a heavy sigh, running a hand through his hair.

"Look, what's the big deal anyway?" she asked. "Why do you wanna train me so badly?"
The Sannin blinked and then gave her a studying look. "If I recall correctly," he mused. "It was a little blonde runt that approached me and begged her to train her."

The blonde had the good grace to blush in embarrassment before she let out a squawk of indignation. "I am not a runt!" The Sannin smirked. "And that was just for the Exams! I already have a sensei--"

"I already talked to your sensei," Jiraiya interrupted. "And he's agreed that it's a good..." He trailed off, startled at the expression that had passed over the blonde's face.

Naruto stared up at him, eyes wide and blinking. "Kakashi-sensei... asked you to train me...?"

Was that hurt he had seen in her eyes? The old ninja's eyes closed in understanding. 'I see... she probably felt abandoned when Kakashi went and trained Sasuke exclusively... For him to do so again without any orders involved...' Knowing he had to tread carefully with this, Jiraiya waited a few moments before answering. "No, I already said it was you who asked me." Naruto opened her mouth to object, but the old ninja beat her to the punch. "Look, with all the renovations going on here in the village, you're not gonna get anything accomplished. I assure you."

She looked down, silently contemplating. After a few moments she stared back up at him, her expression resolute. "When do we leave?"

Jiraiya's expression mirrored her own. "As soon as you finish packing."

ooo

Kakashi walked down the bustling street at a casual pace, his laidback posture belying his mood. In reality his mind was troubled with the thoughts of day's recent events. His students' behavior, Jiraiya's warning...

~ "However, the Akatsuki are still after Kyuubi, and have no doubt sent agents to recover it." ~

Because of her status as Jinchuuriki, Naruto was now the target of a criminal organization most likely bent on world domination. 'An organization that has Uchiha Itachi within its ranks...'

Kakashi's visible eye narrowed slightly and he thought of his other student. It was bad enough that Orochimaru had designs on the boy, but it certainly would do no good for him know of his brother's intentions. It already looked as though he was having a hard time containing his negative emotions - even with his counter-seal in place. For him to learn about Itachi know... well, it would most likely push the kid over the edge.

The Jounin sighed inwardly, turning his gaze skyward. "I doubt you ever had this much trouble with our team, right, Sensei...?"

"Hey, Kakashi!"

The droopy eyed Jounin stopped just outside a small tea shop, his eye falling briefly on two of the occupants sitting at the table closest to the entrance. Turning around, he closed his eye in a greeting grin at the approaching figures - the Jounin instructors of teams 8 and 10. "Hey, Asuma, Kurenai. You two on a date or something?"

The dark-haired genjutsu specialist blinked in surprise, flushing slightly as she looked away. "Don't be ridiculous!" she exclaimed. Asuma merely chuckled. "What brings you here,
Kakashi?

He paused, opening his eye once more. "Just looking for one of my subordinates."

"One of your subordinates, huh?" The bearded Jounin took a drag from his cigarette. "You mean Sasuke?"

One of the figures seated at the table inside the tea shop twitched almost imperceptibly. However, the motion did not go unnoticed by the three seasoned Jounin standing outside.

Kakashi maintained his laidback posture, his visible eye revealing nothing. "Mhm."

Kurenai shifted slightly. "We could help you look for him if you'd like," she offered.

The Copy ninja closed his eye in a grin once more. "I wouldn't want to interrupt your lovely afternoon." The kunoichi gave him a suffering look. "Just, if you see him, give me a holler." With that he turned away, waving casually over his shoulder.

The two Jounin watched him vanish into the crowds before turning their attention back to the tea shop. Both seats were empty. Frowning in worry, they both took off.

ooo

It hadn't taken the Leaf Jounin very long to track down their targets and before long they had the two cloaked figures surrounded on the village outskirts.

Sarutobi Asuma channeled chakra to his feet, walking out onto the water of the small river towards them, his blade raised and poised to strike. He studied their straw hats and black coats, adorned with little red and white clouds, frowning slightly. "Awfully peculiar having two strangers lurking around our village with get-up like that on," he murmured. "Who are you and what are you doing in our village?"

The taller of the pair turned to him, his posture suggesting he had no qualms with being surrounded by three seasoned ninja. "You'd like to know, wouldn't you?" he mocked.

'Black coats... red clouds...' Kakashi's eye narrowed. "How curious," he replied. Asuma and Kurenai paused. "It's not everyday we chance upon two high-ranked nuke-nin here in Konoha... certainly not Kirigakure's Hoshigaki Kisame and Konohagakure's... Uchiha Itachi..."

The other two Leaf Jounin gasped in surprise.

The taller figure removed his hat, revealing a pale blue face housing sharp beady eyes and a grinning maw of shark-like teeth. "Well, well," the figure drawled. "Lookit that, Itachi... we're damn near famous..."

His gazed riveted to the smaller of the two trespassers, Asuma's eyes widened in disbelief as his straw hat was removed to reveal the countenance of none other than Uchiha Itachi himself. "Itachi..." he breathed, as if somehow speaking the name would make it seem more real. "Why did you return here...? Especially after what you did...?"

Kurenai's crimson eyes locked on the younger ninja as well, awaiting his answer. She remembered the day she'd received the news. To think... an entire clan...
The young man made no reply.

"He's looking for something..." The pair turned to Kakashi in confusion. The gray haired ninja's eye never left their opponents. "Or rather... Someone..."

"He's after Sasuke...?" Kurenai asked. 'Is he really planning to finish what he started?'

"No." All three Jounin tensed as the young man's voice cut through the stillness. Red Sharingan raised to meet their gazes, their depths revealing nothing of what their owner was thinking or feeling. "We seek Yondaime-sama's Legacy..."

Kakashi tensed, his eyes narrowing. 'So they are after her...' He raised his hand to his head, slowly shifting his hitai-ate upwards. "You're not going to lay a hand on Naruto..."

Kisame paused, a curious grin spreading across his face at the appearance of the singular red eye similar to the ones his partner possessed. "Hey... he's got an eye like yours." he murmured, amusement evident in his tone.

"Yes," Itachi answered quietly, his voice barely audible over the rush of the river. "Copy-ninja Kakashi... You are skilled in the use of the Sharingan. However, as you are not an Uchiha, you lack the stamina to truly master it."

Yakushi Kabuto's similar parting words echoed in his head and Kakashi tightened his grip on his kunai.

The younger ninja studied him, his face a mask void of any emotion. "Perhaps I should show you," he murmured, turning his body slowly to face the three Konoha ninja fully. "What a true heir of the Sharingan can accomplish..."

The three black tomoe began spinning and Kakashi's own eye widened in recognition. 'No...! He's going to--!' Shutting his normal gray eye, he tensed his body in preparation. Noticing his movements, his two companions did the same. "Asuma, Kurenai! Close your eyes! Now!"

"Kakashi? What--?"

"Just do it!" He kept his gaze on the ex-ANBU member, who stared back at them dispassionately, never moving a muscle. "You can't fall into his jutsu if you don't look into his eyes!"

Itachi continued to stare, letting out a breath that could have almost been mistaken for a sigh. Almost. "Only another true Sharingan wielder can withstand the effects of the Tsukuyomi." he replied, his expression never changing even as his opponent tensed as he tried to withstand the effects of his doujutsu. "Though I wonder," Raising his hand, he casually brushed a few strands of his long bangs out of his piercing red eyes. "How long will you last, Kakashi?"

The gray haired Jounin held back a grunt of effort, beads of sweat running down the sides of his face and into the dark material of his mask. 'Another Sharingan wielder...' All the members of the Uchiha clan were dead - Itachi had seen to that. Only two true Sharingan holders remained; himself and... 'Sasuke...'

Much like a candle being snuffed, Kakashi's concentration fizzled away to nothing.
Around him, the world faded to red.

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Eyes closed, Asuma and Kurenai tensed in worry as their fellow ninja let out a low groan, dropping to his knees. Though there was no splash to indicate he'd fallen into the water, the thought that a mere genjutsu had brought down Hatake Kakashi of all people was enough to cause a considerable amount of worry.

"Kakashi?!" Kurenai called out, biting her lip when she received no response.

Asuma tightened his grip on his blade, straining his ears for any signs of attack. The three of them were only standing there - what the heck had happened? "What's going on, Kakashi?" he called out. "Can we open our eyes yet?"

A few feet away, Kisame let out a low chuckle, causing the two standing ninja to tense again. Reaching over his shoulder, he drew out a large blade swathed in bandages. "This is just too easy..." He shot forward like a rocket, raising the weapon over his head as he prepared to deliver a crushing blow.

"KONOHA SENPUU!"

Water shot upwards in a tide before the shark-like nin, leaving him no time to evade as he was knocked backwards by a sharp kick to the head. Executing a controlled fall, he slid back across the water's surface a few meters, rubbing his chin gingerly. After rising to his feet, he hefted his blade over his shoulder as he shot the offender a surly glare. Beady eyes narrowed at the peculiar sight. "Who the hell is this nutcase?"

Sharingan eyes shifted in his direction. Even at the sight of bright orange leg warmers and green spandex, Itachi's expression did not change. "Maito Gai."

The Beautiful Green Beast took in the scene, his thick brows furrowing darkly. "So... Uchiha Itachi has returned..."

"Be careful, Gai!" Asuma called out. "He's done something to Kakashi!"

Gai's eyes fell on the kneeling figure of his proclaimed rival, his brows furrowing even further. For someone like Kakashi to have been beaten... "Itachi," he growled. "You would attack your old Squad Captain?"

"I severed all connections to this village years ago." Itachi replied calmly.

"So you have," The Taijutsu master shifted, taking up an opening fighting stance. "I have already alerted ANBU," he said calmly. "But it looks as though I have no choice but to hold you off until they arrive."

Kisame let out a snort, hefting his weapon up once more. "You'll be dead long before they get here."

"Don't, Kisame." Itachi met his disbelieving stare, never flinching. "He is not someone to underestimate."
"You kidding me?" the shark-man scoffed, eyeing the Leaf ninja's attire once more. "I can take him."

Gai frowned, tensing his body for an attack.

"It would take time," the elder Uchiha continued. "We'll leave for now."

The taller Akatsuki member stared him down a few seconds before letting out a heavy sigh. "Too bad. Could'a had some fun." Both he and Itachi ran through a series of hands signs before vanishing in a poof of smoke.

"They're gone." Gai said a few moments later, turning to his companions. "You can open your eyes now."

Asuma did so, letting out a sigh of relief. "Glad that's over with."

Kurenai knelt down beside Kakashi, touching his shoulder tentatively. "Kakashi..." she called, her crimson eyes dark in concern. "Are you all right?"

The Copy ninja didn't answer, his eyes staring sightlessly at the water rippling beneath their feet. '72 hours...' Flashes of the things he had seen in that world, the world of the Tsukuyomi, filled his head. Though he'd known it was an illusion, the pain had been all too real. '72 hours in that world... and barely a moment in this one...' Itachi was right; as far as Sharingan was concerned, Kakashi was definitely no match for him.

~ "If you'd truly mastered that Sharingan of yours, you'd be able to see everything." ~

He'd seen enough to know that he was out of his league. The thought was humbling and frightening at the same time. Unbidden, his conversation with Jiraiya rose up in the forefront of his mind once more.

~ "Their group is made up primarily of 9 members - all nukenin from varying villages. Their goal was pretty much what most nukenin want - more power...." ~

Itachi had murdered his entire clan in the pursuit of furthering his own strength. He'd abandoned his own village and allied himself with others who felt the same way. Others like Hoshigaki Kisame... and at one time, the Hebi no Sannin, Orochimaru.

~ "But what's worrisome is what they go after to get it." ~

Blue eyes and blonde hair came to his mind, but Kakashi wasn't sure if the image of was of his student, or of his Sensei.

~ "So you mean to say... Sensei is the Kyuubi's jailer, and not--" ~

~ "I don't know any of the technicalities. Just what I gleaned from the old man." ~

Those who abandon their teammates are worse than trash. That was the lesson his teammate had imparted to him. That same teammate had died to save him. His Sensei had died to save him. Had in fact given his life to protect their village, hoping with his dying breath that the thing that was most precious to him would be protected. And yet here she was now, the target of a dangerous criminal organization simply because the entity sealed within her.
"The Kyuubi is the strongest of all 9 Bijuu and is in possession of no doubt limitless chakra... My guess is that's why Orochimaru tried capturing it before."

She was in danger and he couldn't do a thing for her.

"Kakashi, say something."

"As a Jinchuuriki, Naruto's life will be difficult. She needs to become stronger and she just can't do that here."

'I wasn't supposed to fail her like I did Obito, or Sensei...' he thought brokenly to himself. 'I was supposed to protect her...'

"Kakashi?"

"Because of the fox," Jiraiya's words echoed loudly in his brain. "Naru's gotta learn how to protect herself..."

The edges of his vision blurred and Kakashi found himself slowly sinking down into the cold water. He heard the startled cries of his comrades and felt the hands grasping him, holding him upwards, but he couldn't find the strength to respond. Once again he'd overdone it with the Sharingan... Or perhaps this was the after-effect of the Tsukuyomi? Either way he could feel his body shutting down under the strain. 'I hope you can forgive me, Obito, Minato-sensei...' The world finally faded to black and his eyes drifted shut. 'Naru...'

"Kakashi!" Asuma called, eyes wide at the sight of the infamous Copy Ninja laying unconscious at his feet. He probably wouldn't have believed such a thing was possible had he not witnessed the event for himself.

Gai knelt down, draping the limp ninja's arm over his shoulder before rising to his feet once more. "Let's get him to the hospital," he murmured, his expression grim. "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

The two cloaked figures dashed out of the village, their motions a blur. After a discrete but thorough search, they'd discovered that their target was already on the move. Although the Jinchuuriki had a few hours head start, they were confident that it wouldn't make much of a difference.

"All the same," Kisame grunted, fixing his sword back in its proper place. "I still say I could'a taken him."

"Maybe so," Itachi conceded quietly. "But we're not here to fight. Fighting him would have taken time we do not have to waste."

The larger ninja chuckled. "Man, Itachi... You're no fun at all!"

"So, kid," Blue eyes that had been watching the clouds rolling by overhead fixed themselves on the
face of the Toad Sage, blinking curiously. "What's it like havin' Kakashi as a sensei?"

The blonde paused thoughtfully. "It's cool, I guess," she answered after a moment. "He's really strong and he taught us tree and water-walking." She paused once again, looking down as she remembered how he'd turned her training over to someone she still felt would have been totally incapable of handling the task. What would have happened had she not come across Jiraiya that day? "But I don't really know all that much about him..." An annoyed smirk passed over her face as she remembered the early days of Team 7. "'Cept that he always shows up late to our meetings... and he likes to read your dirty books." She gave him a pointed look.

"Reeeaaally?" A lecherous grin spread across the older ninja's face and the blonde rolled her eyes. He'd always known the little genius brat had possessed some redeeming quality in him somewhere! "Ahh, he's a good kid," he chuckled. "It's just too bad I could never get his sensei hooked."

Naruto blinked, looking back up at him in curiosity. "You knew Kakashi-sensei's sensei?"

"Of course I did!" Jiraiya answered, puffing out his chest in pride. "I taught him!"

"Really?" She'd never realized the pervy old man had actually shared a connection with her teacher. To think he'd somehow had a hand - however indirectly - in shaping Kakashi into the ninja he had grown up to be. And his teacher...? "Who was he?"

Jiraiya paused, a little startled in the honest eagerness and curiosity in her expression. Was it possible that she really didn't know? He filed this info away to ponder over later. "The Yondaime Hokage."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You taught the Yondaime?"

"That's right."

"Could you..." She glanced down, fiddling with a loose string on her jacket. "Tell me about him?" Jiraiya blinked and she blushed slightly in embarrassment. Before learning what he had done to her mere hours after her birth, Naruto had always felt a sense of hero-worship for the famous fourth Hokage. After all, who hadn't? The village had named him one the strongest ninja ever to come out of Konoha. He had saved their home from destruction, sacrificing himself for the sake of everyone - even people he had never, or would ever, meet. However, in all honesty, in the recent months that had passed there were times when she felt angry that she had been the one chosen to carry out the final stage of his task - to be the hero of the village, as it were. Still, despite everything, Naruto tried to remember what the Sandaime had said to her.

~ "I'm the Hokage. It's my job to help everyone and make sure that they're safe and happy." ~

Iruka had said something similar as well. ~ "... We must try to take comfort in the fact that he saved us - not just out of duty, but out of love." ~

'Love...' She turned away from her reveries, unaware of the studying look the old man ninja was giving her. "So, what was he like?"

"Well, to put it simply..." Jiraiya murmured. "He was a genius."

Naruto's face fell slightly. She disliked that word more than anything. All it really meant to her
was some uppity, arrogant jerk who looked down their noses at everyone simply because they thought they were stronger, smarter, or better than everyone else. Two prime examples instantly came to mind, both Neji and Sasuke, causing her to fight off a grimace. 'Although... Neji had almost been... normal... back at the Ichiraku...' she thought after a moment. After all, anyone who offered to pay for her ramen couldn't be that bad! However, the Hyuuga was not her primary concern at the moment. She turned her attention back to the older ninja walking beside her. "He was a prodigy?" she asked.

If Jiraiya could hear the disappointment in her tone, he made no note of it. "Pah, far from it." he answered. "He worked hard for the strength he had, rising up the ranks to become a ninja feared by enemies all across the Five Shinobi Nations. As a matter of fact, during the war Iwagakure used to have a 'Flee on sight' order in place next to his picture in their Bingo books--"

"I know all that," she cut in, frowning lightly. "What was he like as a person?"

The Sannin blinked again, his expression turning thoughtful. They walked several moments in silence before he spoke again. "He was a rude little punk when he was young... And he was reckless..." he said. "And he smiled a lot--even when he knew he was doing something incredibly dangerous or stupid..."

The blonde listened to him, trying to reconcile the stone face she habitually visited with the wild and powerful young man he described. A grin slowly spread across her face. "He sounds like a fun guy."

"Y'know, you would think so," Jiraiya smirked at her. "You're a lot like him."

Her legs suddenly locking in place, Naruto stared after the Sannin with wide eyes. "I... I am...?"

Jiraiya kept walking, his smirk being replaced by a small smile. "Yup."

Naruto stood stock still in stunned silence, mulling over his words. 'Uh... like the Yondaime...?' A grin spread across her face once more and she ran to catch up with him. "Too cool!" Falling into step with him once more, blue eyes zeroed in on his face again, shining eagerly. "So, Ero-sennin, who was your teacher?"

"None other than the Sandaime no Hokage himself." He chuckled at the awestruck expression that flashed across her face. So, she was finally starting to realize how truly amazing he actually was, was she? It was certainly about time!

"Wow..." Naruto murmured softly. "So Hokage-jiji taught you, you taught Yondaime-sama, and he taught Kakashi-sensei..." A victorious grin spread across her face as she began jumping up and down excitedly. "So that means I'm gonna be Hokage for sure! Woohoo! Yeah!"

So caught up was she in her little victory dance that she didn't notice Jiraiya stop to watch her with a gentle smile on his face.

ooo

"All right... here we are."

Blue eyes blinked at the small little inn in front of them before falling back on the Sannin. "And this is...?"
Jiraiya quirked an eyebrow at her. "This is where we're gonna be staying for the night." he answered, stepping into the genkan to remove his sandals.

Was he serious? "Wha...? But there's still plenty of hours before dark!" she exclaimed. "We can keep going!"

"We can, but we're not." The blonde opened her mouth to object but Jiraiya beat her to the punch. "As your new sensei, my decision stands." At her frown he gave a mere shrug of his shoulders. "Besides, it's not like we're in any hurry."

"Are you kidding? What about your ex-girlfriend?" Catching the slight twitch his shoulders made, the little blonde genin's expression turned dubious. "What, are you scared she'll beat you up or something?"

Jiraiya twitched again before turning to face the clerk with an obviously fake laugh. "Don't be ridiculous!" he exclaimed, accepting the key with a grin and a slight nod of his head. "Besides, haven't you ever heard the saying 'Chance favors the prepared mind'?"

"Yeah," she countered. "But 'he who hesitates is lost.'"

The two ninja stared each other down briefly before the Sannin glanced away, grimacing slightly. 'Damn, she's good...' Turning his gaze to the entryway, his eyes widened in surprise when the most voluptuous brunette dressed in the tiniest dress he had ever seen came into view. Their eyes met and she tipped him a wink, tittering coyly behind a slim hand. "Oooh, would you look at that!"

Naruto blinked, turning to see what the commotion was. Her eyes fell on the woman and then back to her 'sensei'. "Oi, Ero-sennin," she called out. The Sannin didn't so much as glance her way. "Don't forget about my training."

"Huh?" He wiped the drool from his chin, never breaking his gaze. Ooh, by Kami, wasn't she a beauty! "Oh, right... training..." He placed their room key in her hand, giving her an absent-minded pat on the head. "Go on up to the room and meditate for a few hours..." he muttered. "Focus your chakra."

'Focus my...?' Naruto stared incredulously at the old lecher who was already sauntering back out onto the street after the busty young woman. "Whaa...?! You can't be serious! I thought you said you were gonna teach me!"

Jiraiya paused, glancing over his shoulder at her briefly. "Lesson #1," he replied in serious tone. "Always obey your sensei." Turning away, the lecherous grin spread across his face once more as he skuttled away. "Don't wait up! Oh, miss! Miss! Has any one ever told you what big... eyes you have!"

For several moments Naruto remained standing at the genkan, blinking in disbelief. Had she actually been stood up...? 'He's worse than I thought...' The sheer indignity of it all finally caught up with her brain, earning a loud growl of frustration as she clenched the room key in a shaking fist. "ERO-SENNIN, YOU JERK!!"
Once he had calmed down enough to put thoughts of his frustratingly enigmatic teammate aside - which was many hours later, mind you- Sasuke came the startling realization that he had essentially stormed off in the midst of a debriefing session. Under normal circumstances he wouldn't have made such a big deal about it - considering Kakashi's penchant for tardiness, could he really get mad that he had decided to leave early? - but the young Uchiha couldn't pass up an opportunity like this. A great deal had happened during their so-called mission, and as he was certain his teammates had already given their reports, this would be the only time he would have to get some answers to his questions without interruptions.

He remembered approaching that strange, older genin who specialized in information gathering - was Kabuto his name? - requesting information regarding some of the other participants in the exams. Naruto had shut him down, insisting that it was rude to inquire about people's weaknesses, especially while they were present. The Uchiha couldn't help but suspect that the blonde was more concerned about her own secrets being revealed than anyone else's, but to his frustration and dismay, the bespectacled genin had acquiesced to her request.

"What is it that you're hiding, Naruto?" he wondered for what seemed the millionth time. Approaching the door to his sensei's apartment, he vowed that he wouldn't be leaving until he found out. Stepping onto the threshold, he raised his hand to knock only to pause when he realized the door was partly ajar. "What's this about...?"

"...I'm telling you, something has to be done! We can't just stand around!"

"You saw what happened last time... Do you really want a repeat performance?"

Sasuke frowned, peering into his teacher's abode. Kakashi's apartment was moderately small - he doubted the Jounin spent much time here - the kitchen, sitting room, and bedroom were all joined together in one combined space. Though the genin was certain the space was just about as much a single ninja needed, it all seemed terribly cramped when occupied by three extra adults. Sasuke's brows furrowed in confusion, recognizing the three figures as Jounin instructors. Spotting him standing in the doorway, all three tensed, looking as if they'd been caught with their hands in the proverbial cookie jar. "What're you three doing here?" he questioned. "Where's Kakashi?" The three Jounin tensed again, their gazes imperceptibly shifting behind them. Sasuke followed the moment with his own eyes, the dark orbs widening slightly at the fourth figure laying quietly on the bed behind them. Limp, silver hair was visible beneath the thick, dark quilt bearing the crest of the Hatake Clan. "Is that... Kakashi?" Dark eyes focused on the Jounin once again, narrowing in suspicion. "What the hell's going on?"

Asuma and Kurenai exchanged looks while Gai let out a loud, nervous laugh. "Nothing! Nothing's going on!" he exclaimed, waving a hand dismissively. "Not to worry, everything's just fi--"

The apartment door behind Sasuke slammed open with a loud bang, turning everyone's attention to the young Jounin donned in dark sunglasses with a panicked expression on his face.

"Aoba?"

"I just heard the news!" he exclaimed, oblivious to the panicked expression of Kurenai and the furious waving of arms from Asuma. "Is it true? That Uchiha Itachi's back in town and he's after the Uzumaki girl?"

The world came to a loud, grinding, screeching halt.
Gai let out a loud groan, slapping a hand to his forehead.

"Idiot," Kurenai growled under her breath. The young Jounin blinked behind his glasses, tilting his head in confusion.

Sasuke stood perfectly still, his eyes widening ever so slowly as the information processed through his brain. Uchiha Itachi had returned...? Was it possible? 'He's here... in the village...' His fists clenched tightly at his sides. 'Itachi...' Turning sharply on his heel, he bolted towards the door, shoved past a startled Aoba, and vanished out of sight.

"Was that...? Oh crap..."

Asuma threw his cigarette to the floor - he had been just about to light it when the boy entered the room - slamming his fist against the wall. "Damn it!"

Kurenai shot a sharp look to the green clad Jounin beside her. "Gai,"

The Taijutsu master nodded, rising to his feet. "This isn't going to end well at all..."

ooo

He charged across the rooftops, his blood racing and his heart pounding in his ears. The jounin's words kept echoing over and over in his brain, fueling the adrenaline rushing through his system. 'Itachi came back after all this time...' His mind supplied an image of the older Uchiha. 'For Naruto...?' He remembered the atrocities he had committed, the words he had spoken. A foreign feeling rushed through his body and Sasuke unknowingly put on an extra burst of speed. He couldn't--he wouldn't let him have his way! Not this time! "Itachi... I won't let you have her!"

Bounding across a few more rooftops, he touched down on the street once more, spotting a familiar head of pink hair in the distance. "Sakura!"

The pink haired kunoichi paused in her sweeping of her front stoop, her eyes lighting up at the sight of her teammate. However, once she took in the anxiety and desperation all too evident in his dark eyes, she frowned in worry. "Sasuke-kun...? What's wrong?" She paused, remembering how he and her other teammate had disappeared in the midst of their meeting. "What happened? Why'd you and Naru ditch--?"

Sasuke closed the distance between them in a few quick strides, grasping hold of her arm urgently. "Nevermind that," he cut in. "Where is Naruto now?"

She blinked in surprise - moreso at the boy's tone and reason for seeking her out than the fact that he had initiated contact between them. Why was he so desperate to find Naruto? Hadn't they left together? What had happened? A million more questions whizzed through the poor girl's brain as she found that old, familiar sensation bubbling in her chest once more. However, feeling the boy's pinning stare upon her, Sakura fixed him an apologetic look. "I don't know where Naruto is," she answered. "I haven't seen her since our meeting." She frowned as Sasuke released her, not missing the panicked look that had darted across his face briefly as he looked away. "Sasuke-kun, what is going on? Please tell me!"

He spared her a quick glance before turning away once more. "I don't have time to explain," he ground out. "I've gotta go." Not waiting for response, he turned and bounded up onto the rooftops
once more, sprinting away.

"Sasuke-kun?!" Sakura watched him go, her face darkening in worry. 'What in the world is going on?'

ooo

Sasuke dashed across the village, hitting all the spots he knew the blonde tended to frequent - not that he made a habit of knowing where the blonde liked to go, of course - his agitation increasing when the blonde still refused to show herself. Knowing of only one other place the kunoichi might be, Sasuke made his way to the Ichiraku, sliding to a stop in front of the little ramen stand in a flurry of dust. Both Teuchi and Ayame looked up at his arrival, blinking in surprise.

Coming up the counter, Sasuke let his eyes dart over the empty bar seats before staring up at the owner urgently. "Hey, old man," he called out. "My teammate Naruto comes by here a lot - have you seen her here today?"

"Yes, she was here with Hyuuga-san," Ayame answered. Sasuke twitched at this bit of information, though he was unsure of why, remaining silent as she continued. "But that was this morning."

"She stopped by again later on," Teuchi quipped, turning the boy's focus over to him. "Mentioned something about going on a trip."

"A trip?" Sasuke blinked in confusion; she certainly hadn't mentioned anything about a trip before. Was it a mission of some sort? Why hadn't he...er, they... been told? "With who?"

"Why, Jiraiya-sama, of course." the old ramen chef answered. At the boy's confused look, he added on, "Big, tall guy with white hair. The two of them left a few hours ago. They're probably way outta town by now."

A few hours... If they were walking at a casual pace he should be able to catch up with them easily. Sasuke paused, running over the chef's description in his head once more. "Big guy, white hair - got it." Wasting no more time, he took to the rooftops once more.

Ayame watched his departure, blinking in confusion. "My, my," she exclaimed. "First Hyuuga-san, now Uchiha-san... Naru-chan sure is popular today..."

Teuchi nodded in agreement, folding his arms across his chest with a gruff frown. "Well, I don't like it," he muttered, a surge of protective instincts rushing through him. Just who did these boys think they were scuttling around after his number one customer? "Naru should have more female friends." He paused, nodding at the fatherly logic behind his own words. "Boys her age have too much of a one track mind, after all..."

His daughter gave him a knowing look, heaving a dramatic sigh. "Now, father..." she chided. "You were that young once, too, you know..."

The old man twitched guiltily before flushing in embarrassment. "That was a long time ago..." he coughed. "Things were different back then."

Ayame giggled. "Of course they were..."
Oblivious to their lighthearted words, Sasuke left the gates of the village behind him, continuing on his way as fast as his legs could carry him. Nothing about the situation made sense. 'Naruto on a mission alone...?' The exams were over - there was no need for their team to be split up anymore. And who was this Jiraiya person? Once again he had too many questions and not enough answers.

Still, none of that mattered at the moment. Sasuke thought of his brother once more, a frown spreading across his face. "I've got to keep moving," he told himself. "I've got to find her before he does!"

ooo

Naruto flopped down on the bed she had chosen for herself, frowning up at the ceiling in annoyance. Of all the indignities she had had to face thus far, this one took the cake! Being what she was, Naruto was accustomed to being ignored, but to have someone promise their time only to reneg on the deal - not because she was a monster, or a freak, but because some woman had shown up with too much cleavage and not enough clothes... She paused, grimacing in distaste. 'Stupid Ero-sennin... should've known it would turn out this way...' Rolling onto her stomach, she let out a petulant huff, trying to reconcile the lecherous old man with the image of the young Hokage whom he had taught.

An image Jiraiya squatting in the bushes with a telescope in his hands, chortling to himself, came to mind and the blonde let out a loud groan. "Sheesh... how did Yondaime-sama put up with him?" She paused, startled at how loud her voice was in the small room. Naruto sat up, quickly coming to the startling realization of how lonely she was. 'And it hasn't even been a whole day yet!'

She thought back to the village, and the precious people she had left behind. She'd gotten the chance to inform Ichiraku-jiji of her plans, and though she was sure Kakashi knew, what about Sakura? And what about her other friends? Would they be all right without her? Well, of course they would... but would they miss her at all? After few minutes pondering this--she hated meditation; she was no good at it--the silence got to be a bit too oppressive for her liking. Deciding she had had enough, Naruto bit her finger hard enough to draw blood. Running through a short sequence of hands signs, she slammed her hand down on bed quilt with an eager yell of, "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!"

Her action resulted in a poof of smoke, from which emerged a familiar little red frog. "Yo!"

Blue eyes lit up in happiness at the sight of a familiar face. "Gamakichi-kun!"

"Hiya, Neechan!" the little frog grinned. "What can I do for ya?"

The blonde's smile faltered slightly and she felt a rush of shame. Was it fair for her to summon Gamakichi for no reason? What if she had called him away from his family and friends? It certainly wasn't his job to keep her from being lonely, was it?

'Sheesh, Uzumaki... when'd you get to be so depressing...?'

"Neechan?"

"O-oh yeah..." The blonde flushed, scratched her head in embarrassment as she struggling to come up with some task. "Ne, Gamakichi, you deliver messages, right?"
"You bet your kunai I do!" he exclaimed proudly. "Got one ya need me to deliver?"

She nodded. "To my teammate, Sakura."

The little frog paused, searching his memory for the name. A few moments later his beady eyes lit up in recognition. "That's the pink one, right?" he asked. "She's not in any trouble again, is she?"

"Nah, nothing like that." Naruto answered with a chuckle. "See, since I'm gonna be with Ero-sennin on this trip for who knows how long--" She thought of how quickly he had wandered off after that girl, trying hard not to grimace. "And I've got a feeling it's gonna be a while..." I was wondering if you could ask her to keep an eye on my plants." At the Summons' curious look, she flushed slightly. "I don't want them to wilt and die while I'm gone."

Despite the blonde's embarrassment, Gamakichi was rather impressed at her appreciation for nature. Though it had already been high, his respect for her raised a few more pegs. "No prob, Neechan!" he exclaimed. He turned to leave but stopped, glancing back at her once more. "Say, you wouldn't happen to have anything to eat, would ya?"

Blinking, Naruto fumbled through her pack a few moments before stumbling across an open package of Pocky. She offered it up to the little amphibian who croaked in delight.

"You're my hero, Neechan!"

She smiled back, remembering all that he and his father had done for her. Why, if it weren't for his intervention, she might not have been sitting there now! "Well, you tell your oyaji I said the same thing about you an' him."

The little frog paused, flushing in embarrassment. "Heh heh, it was nothin'!" Finishing his snack, Gamakichi hopped over to the windowsill, pausing only to turn and give her a little wave. "Well... I better get movin'. Catcha ya later!" With another quick wave he vanished in a poof of smoke.

Sitting a few moments in silence, Naruto let out another sigh before flopping down on the bed once more. Alone with only her thoughts as company, her mind recounted her last encounter with the frog summons. Gamakichi had convinced his father to honor his agreement with the young genin, and without the Boss Summon's assistance, Naruto wasn't sure she would have ever been able to get the upper hand in that battle.

'But they weren't the only ones who helped me...' she thought to herself, remembering that bizarre discussions with her tenant regarding the Seal set in place by the Yondaime. Upon her first discovery of the damage done to her seal, the fox's words had been cryptic at best.

~ THE SEAL MERELY KEEPS ME LOCKED WITHIN THIS FORSAKEN CAGE AND AWAY FROM YOUR EASILY IMPRESSIONABLE APE-LIKE MIND. I AM STILL TRAPPED INSIDE THIS HELL HOLE. ~

He'd been so arrogant! It wasn't as if she'd asked for him to be locked away inside of her and yet the furry old prick made it seem as though she were to blame!

~ 'And you can't escape?' ~

~ WHY SHOULD I? I'VE NO DESIRE TO WALK AROUND POSING AS A WHELP LIKE ~
At the time, Naruto had assumed his words to mean that possession was - though possible - something that he had no intention of lowering himself to do. However, she'd been sadly mistaken when she attempted a Konbi Henge with Gamabunta. With her consciousness linked with the Boss Toad, Kyuubi had taken it upon himself to take control of 'their' body in order to do battle with Shukaku-Gaara. She'd been pissed, to be sure, but her anger paled in comparison to what had happened next.

Kyuubi had 'appeared' before her in the mindscape, not within the bars of his cage, not as a giant furry fox, but as a humanoid creature. 'Granted, an annoying, grabby, thinks-he's-too-cool-for-his-own-good humanoid... with bizarre taste in clothes,' she grumbled to herself, thinking of his remarks following his grand entrance. However, when all was said and done, despite his words and behavior, it was the fox's parting actions that really made the blonde wonder.

He had told her of the Shukaku-Gaara's weak points. He had provided her with the chakra she needed to form hundreds of Kage Bunshin as well as summon Gamakichi and Gamabunta. He had provided her with the form capable of fighting the Ichibi in hand-to...er... fang-to-claw combat. Yes, he had taken control briefly once their minds linked, but once the blonde had managed to regain her bearings, he had relinquished control without a fight.

'YOU ARE FREE TO RECLAIM THE REIGNS AT ANY TIME...' ~ he'd said to her. ~ THOUGH IN A FEW MOMENTS IT WON'T MATTER...~

'I don't believe it...' she marveled to herself. It was true that her death would certainly be an inconvenience for the sealed demon, but with the Seal weakened as it was, he could have taken control and vacated the battle at any time. However, he remained and made sure that she was able to achieve victory. If it were not for him, she wouldn't be sitting where she was right now! *The Fox saved my life... as well as my teammates...'*

Closing her eyes, she willed herself into her subconsciousness once more, bringing herself before the large bars holding the Kyuubi at bay. Gazing upwards, her blue eyes fell on the white ofuda bearing the kanji for 'Seal'. Forcing her thoughts away from the two Hokage responsible for its creation and repair, she steeled herself for the task at hand. "Oi, Kyuubi!"

From within the dark depths of the cage, a large red eye opened, narrowing at the small blonde standing before the bars. There was a snort before a smooth voice replied, ~ ANOTHER LIFE-THREATENING PREDICAMENT... YOU CERTAINLY DO MAKE THINGS INTERESTING, LITTLE JAILER. ~ A large head ventured closer, white fangs gleaming in the dim light of the large chamber. ~ YOU NEED MORE CHAKRA, I PRESUME? ~

Naruto paused, trying to reconcile the large creature with the red-headed figure that had approached her before. Why was it he had approached her in that form anyway? She shoved the thought away for another day, meeting the large red eyes head on. "No, actually... I just came to talk you." she answered. "I never got the chance to thank you before... for your help, that is..."

Silence fell over the chamber for several moments only to be broken by deep, rumbling laughter from the Kyuubi. ~ SURELY YOU JEST. ~ he snorted.

The blonde bristled, glaring up at him angrily. "Surely, I don't," she snarled, scowling as the fox continued to laugh, making her ears ring. "What the hell's so funny?"
The fox's chortling laughter echoed all around the chamber. ~**DO YOU REALLY EXPECT TO GAIN MY FAVOR THIS WAY?**~ he asked with a sneer, ignoring the blonde jerk of confusion and surprise. Leaning as close to the bars as he could manage, he glared down at her with his fangs bared. ~**MAKE NO MISTAKE, LITTLE MORTAL...**~ **DO NOT CONFUSE MY ASSISTANCE FOR KINDNESS. I LEND YOU MY CHAKRA FOR ONE REASON AND ONE REASON ONLY--**

Her patience finally reaching a boiling point, Naruto cut off his words as slammed her fist against one of the cage's bars, the sound resonating through the chamber. The fox paused, studying her. "I don't give a damn what your reasons are!" she snarled. "You listen to me, you big supernatural jackass! I didn't come here to bow and scrape to the likes of you." Her eyes narrowed, her expression turning as fierce as she could manage without the influence of his youki. "I may depend on your chakra in a tight scrape, but don't you dare think for a second that I'd hesitate to take myself out if you stepped even a single claw out of line!" She turned away then, letting out a scoff of derision. 'And to think that I actually...' "Arrogant bastard.... a person would think you'd never heard of gratitude!"

The Kyuubi was silent.

Glancing back over her shoulder, she spared the caged demon a bitter smirk. "Oh, nothing to say, Mighty One? Whatever... I don't know why I even bothered..." Without another word, she left the mindscape, a disappointed scowl still present on her face.

The chamber remained silent, and even though the little human had returned to her conscious state, the words she had spoken stayed behind.

Drawing his chakra in around him tightly, the Kyuubi no Youko allowed his form to shift and change, shrinking and changing until it once again took on the appearance of the red-haired human that had confronted the blonde while linked with the old frog. Red eyes narrowed in contemplation as he replayed the previous conversation in his mind. She certainly was a peculiar human. She held no fear of him; she stared him down while under the onslaught of his chakra, even made demands of it regularly. And now the little whelp had even dared to insult him - several times in fact. Did she not know that thousands of humans before had been slain for far less slights than hers. Though he no longer possessed a corporeal body - a fact he lamented daily - shouldn't the little urchin have at least shown a bit more respect given the fact that he had once taken control of her body?

He paused, considering, before letting out an amused chuckle. ~**YOU ARE A STRANGE ONE... LITTLE JAILER...**~

ooo

Naruto opened her eyes to the plain white walls of their rented room, the conversation with Kyuubi still at the forefront of her mind. 'Stupid fox...' The silence of the room was as oppressive as ever and the blonde found herself wishing she hadn't let Jiraiya convince her to go with him. 'Stupid pervert...' Sitting up, she hugged her knees to her chest, letting out a heavy sigh. "I wanna go home..."

ooo
Running full tilt, Sasuke made it to the nearest border town in no time at all. Once he touched down on the bustling little street, the Uchiha immediately began searching for signs of his loudmouthed teammate. *She's got to be here somewhere...* he thought to himself, frowning when no blonde hair fell within his sight. "Where the heck could she be...?" Scanning eyes noticed a small little inn several blocks down, and Sasuke rushed towards it, stopping at the front desk where a startled clerk gasped in surprise at his sudden appearance. "Hey, have you seen a short blonde kid with a tall, white-haired old man?"

Taking a few seconds to regain her bearings, the young clerk shook her head with an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry... but all of our guests are female--eh?" She blinked in surprise once more as he took off running once more.

Repeating his query at several different inns, Sasuke could feel his frustration slowly turning into panic as his search yielded no results. Reaching the opposite end of town, he came upon yet another inn.

"Welcome!" the clerk at the front desk replied. "How may I help yo--?"

"Have you seen an old man?" he cut in. "With white hair? He's traveling with a short blonde kid?"

The clerk blinked in confusion, puzzling over the question a few moments. "Hmm... that does sound familiar..." Sasuke's eyes widened. "Takiko-chan mentioned something during the shift change -- oh yes! An old man with white hair and a short blonde!" She opened up the sign in book, scanning down the list of guests. "First floor at the end of the ha--" She looked up only to find that he was nowhere in sight. "Huh? Where'd he go?"

Sasuke barreled down the hall, his heart pounding his his throat as he approached the prescribed door. Sliding to a stop, he pounded on the door frantically, silently hoping that he wasn't too late. "Oi, Naruto! Naruto! Open up!"

Naruto twitched, waking from her doze at the sound of someone knocking at the door. Taking a few seconds to orient herself once again to her surroundings - and wipe the drool from her chin - she cast the wooden door a reproachful look and rose to her feet. No doubt it was the old pervert back from his jaunt. Leave it to him to be too concerned by a pretty face to make sure he got two room keys.

'I should leave him out there...' she thought to herself as she rose to her feet. "It's about time you got back, ya old lech!" A disapproving frown on was evident her face as she reached down and opened the door. "What's the matter? Did the girl get tired of you already--" The rest of her words died in her throat and blue eyes widened at the sight on the other side of the door.

"Naruto--!" The room door slowly swung open at Sasuke blinked in shock at the little blonde boy staring at him from inside. A hunched over old man sitting on a futon blinked up at him owlishly. Sasuke's stomach twisted in a harsh knot. "You're not..."

Blue eyes registered confusion as they took in the sight of the young man standing in the doorway,
donned in a black coat and a scratched Konoha hitai-ate, trying to determine why he looked so familiar. He locked his gaze with hers, the red pupils and black tomoe unmistakable. "Sasuke...?"

Uchiha Itachi’s expression remained blank, his tone betraying no emotion. "Hello again... Narus-san."

~ End Chapter 22
Chapter 23: Siblings

Chapter Summary

"I wanted only one thing... That man... the one who killed my family... I wanted to kill him..."

Chapter 23

Sakura gazed down at the little creature sitting on her windowsill, her brow furrowed in confusion. After all, how often was it that she encountered talking frogs asking to speak to her directly? "So..." she said slowly. "Naruto sent you?"

"That's right, Missy," Gamakichi answered with an authoritative nod. "Asked me to come an' deliver a message to you."

"A message?" The pink-haired kunoichi thought of the bizarre behavior her two teammates had been displaying recently. The brief expression that had skirted across Sasuke's really put her on edge. She frowned worriedly. "Where is she?"

"Out in Otafuku town with Jiraiya, I imagine."

'Jiraiya...? Why does that name sound familiar...?' Shaking the thought away, she turned her attention back to the little frog in front of her. "She's all right, isn't she?"

"She was when I left her," the toad answered, although that really did nothing to reassure the young girl. "She wanted to know if you if you would look after her plants while she's away."

"Her plants..." Sakura remembered the numerous green potted plants that had occupied the blonde's small apartment. She smiled when she thought of how much her teammate enjoyed them. "That's no problem, I guess... Will she be gone long?"

"No clue, really... but I s'pose she'll keep in touch." Gamakichi shrugged, hopping down from his perch on the windowsill. "Well, gotta run. It was nice seein' ya again, Missy!" With a cheery wave, the frog vanished in a poof of smoke.

Alone in her room once more, Sakura let out a heavy sigh. Things just seemed to be getting more and more bizarre by the minute. Naruto was out of the village, Sasuke was freaking out, Kakashi-sensei was doing only Kami knows what... "Too weird..." Gazing out onto the village, she rested her chin in her palm with a thoughtful frown. Why was it that without the loud blonde around, Team 7 seemed to be slowly drifting apart? "Naru... wherever you are... I hope you're all right..."

ooo

Naruto remained still, gazing upwards at the dark-haired figure standing in her doorway.
Uchiha Itachi gazed back at her, his expression revealing nothing. "Naru-san," The blonde tensed as the timbre of his voice struck a chord in the back of her mind. Did she know this man...? "Why don't you step outside so we can take a walk...?"

Blue eyes narrowing in suspicion, the blonde slowly stepped out into the hall. 'Just who the hell is this guy...?' she wondered. 'And why does he...?' An amused snort brought her out of her thoughts and her gaze snapped upward, homing in on the tall, bizarre looking figure standing behind him.

Kisame chuckled, sizing up the little genin. Was this really the vessel for the Nine-Tails? How funny! "Check out the look," he snorted. "The kid's a real animal."

The blonde's eyes narrowed even further. "I'm a ninja, not an animal." she snapped.

"We are all animals," Itachi said calmly. "We exist to kill; this is an undisputable fact."

She scowled back at him. "What do you want?"

"For you to come with us."

Naruto tensed and Kisame grinned. "Uh-oh... the brat might run, Itachi," His grin widened as he reached over his shoulder for the wrapped blade strapped to his back. "Whaddya say I take an arm or a leg to slow'im down?"

"You can try!" Naruto snarled, reaching for a shuriken in her weapons pouch.

The blue nuke-nin let out a raucous laugh. "Too slow!" He lunged towards her with rapid speed, bringing his blade down to strike.

Letting out a sharp gasp of surprise, Naruto jumped up and landed nimbly on his sword hilt. Before he could counteract, she executed a tight flip over his head, landing directly behind him. Lifting her head upwards, she was suddenly met the Uchiha's blank stare, freezing in fear and surprise.

'Wha... how did he--?'

Kisame moved forward once again, knocking her feet out from under her with a loud laugh. "Well, ain't you a nimble one?" He raised his sword again, gripping the hilt tightly. "Guess we're taking a leg after all."

Blue eyes could only stare in terror as the blade loomed in for the kill. However, seconds later her view was obscured by a large cloud of smoke. She blinked as a large toad materialized before her, blocking the blade with heavy arm guards.

Itachi's red eyes shifted over her head. "It's him..."

Turning, Naruto let out a gasp at the sight of the white-haired Sannin himself, standing behind her with the curvy brunette from before over his shoulder unconscious. 'He... he came back...' she marveled, eyes bright with hope and relief. The anger and resentment she had felt at his abandonment quickly vanished.

"So, boys..." he drawled regarding the Akatsuki members with feigned disinterest. While he'd known they'd try to make their move so soon, he was a bit surprised at their boldness. "Thought
you could fool me with this gorgeous beauty, eh?" He threw his head back, letting out a loud laugh. "Fools!" He paused, striking a pose. "I am the super-wise sage of Myoboku-zan, the Legendary Jiraiya! I NEVER fall prey to pretty girls - all the pretty girls fall for me!"

The hall fell into an awkward silence. The old Sannin let out an uneasy laugh.

Seeing her so-called sensei potentially making an ass out of himself in front of her would-be killers, Naruto grumbled as all the respect she had gained for the old man in the last few minutes fizzled away to nothing. "Moron..."

The toad-warrior Jiraiya had summoned vanished in a poof of smoke and Kisame scoffed in derision. "This guy's really one of the Legendary Three...?" he murmured.

"Don't be fooled by the act, Kisame." Itachi cautioned. "It would take us both to defeat him..." He paused, meeting the older ninja's gaze with a blank stare. "It's likely we would all die in the attempt."

"Then how 'bout you two step away from my student?" Jiraiya suggested, the jovial expression gone from his face. "I doubt the kid's too keen on dyin' today either."

A hush fell over the hall once more when all four ninja became aware of the new presence at the end of the corridor. "Only one person has to die today..." The short figure stepped out of the shadows, and the twin tomoe residing inside gleaming Sharingan eyes spun rapidly as they zeroed in on Itachi. "And it's gonna be you!!"

Naruto stared, her eyes wide at the sight of her teammate. 'Sasuke...?'

Kisame studied the two dark-haired ninja standing on opposite ends of the hall. As he took in their glaringly obvious similarities, a curious grin spread across his face. "Well now... the kid's got eyes just like yours, Itachi..." he mused. "And he looks a lot like you, too."

Itachi was silent a few moments. "That's because he's my younger brother."

'What?!' Naruto froze as her mind was suddenly bombarded by memories.

~ "My goal... is to kill a certain somone..." ~

~ "I wanted only one thing... That man... the one who killed my family... I wanted to kill him..." ~

She knew that Sasuke had wanted vengeance for the death of his entire clan. It was the force that drove him to be the best. He wanted the strength to kill the person who had taken away his precious people.

~ "My brother... I wanted to avenge them all... that was my dream..." ~

She gazed at her teammate before turning her attention to the older ninja that was so unlike him, but still similar in a way that put her on edge. 'Is this guy really the one...?'

The tall blue ninja laughed again. "Your brother, you say?" he asked. "The way I heard it all the Uchiha died in that massacre."

Sasuke growled, clenching his fists at his side. "You killed them all... Every last one of them..." he
ground out. "I swore that one day I'd make you pay... and today is that day!" He quickly ran through several hand signs, thrusting his hand out as he gathered chakra in his palm. The tension-filled corridor was soon filled with the sound of chirping birds. "CHIDORI!" Like a tightly coiled spring, Sasuke rushed forward, his chakra ripping up chunks of carpet and plaster as he raced down the hall towards his intended target. "Now DIE!!"

A loud explosion shook the inn as a section of the hall was blown outwards. Smoke and debris filled the hall as Jiraiya grasped the young blonde and pulled her back towards him. Naruto barely acknowledged the action, straining her eyes to determine the condition of the two brothers in the distance. After several moments, the smoke cleared revealing Itachi holding Sasuke's chakra charged hand in a vice-like grip, his blank expression a sharp contrast to the younger ninja's pale-faced fury.

Crimson eyes containing three tomoe each gazed at the crackling electricity dispassionately. "Chidori..." he murmured. "Hatake Kakashi..."

The younger Uchiha scowled as the chakra slowly fizzled away. "Itachi... you---" Attempting to wrench his hand away in order to strike him, he let out a sharp cry of pain as Itachi calmly snapped his wrist.

The blonde gasped in alarm. "SASUKE!" Jiraiya's firm grip on her shoulder held her in place.

"Damn it..." Gritting his teeth against the sharp pain in his hand, Sasuke gazed up at Itachi with hateful eyes. He couldn't allow himself to be beaten! He couldn't allow himself to be weak! "I'll kill you!" He raised his free hand to strike, only to be kicked into the nearby wall.

Letting out a scream, Naruto wrenched free from Jiraiya's hold and raced down the hall towards them. "Leave him alone!" She raised her hands, forming a cross seal to create Kage Bunshin. "Don't you dare hurt Sasuke!!"

Red eyes cut into her, blazing in fury. "No!" Sasuke snarled. "Stay out of this, Naruto!"

She froze, eyes widening in surprise as he slowly rose to his feet. The look in his eyes was familiar... almost identical to the one he'd given her back during the Chuunin exams.

~ "I'm only here to fight strong opponents. Next time, don't get in my way. I can fight battles on my own." ~

He'd glared at her with such loathing then, and that same emotion was present in his gaze even now. It was if he still viewed her as an obstacle in his path despite everything they had been through. 'You still don't get it at all... do you?" "Sasuke..."

Something flickered in the younger Uchiha before vanishing beneath the haze of pain, anger, and frustration of red and black Sharingan. "I told you before... it has to be me that kills Itachi..." His eyes darkened slightly. "I've fostered my hatred, lived my life only for this moment..." Twin tomoe spun around wildly. "I won't let you take that me!!" He turned back towards Itachi, charging him head on.

Itachi met him head on, driving a fist into his stomach. His expression did not change as he kicked him into the wall and watched him slide to the floor. Nor did he react as he stalked towards him slowly. "Foolish little brother," he murmured. Itachi reached down, lifting him up by his throat. He leaned forward to murmur into his ear. "You are still too weak."
Sasuke growled.

"All your efforts are for nothing," Itachi murmured tonelessly, indifferent to the younger boy's attempts to wrench free from his grasp. "You are not the one I seek." His crimson eyes drifted towards the pale face blonde, drawing a strangled growl from his brother as he redoubled his efforts.

"I told you to foster your hatred of me..." he continued. "It's the only way you will ever be strong enough to kill me." He gazed into the eyes of his younger brother, his own black tomoe shifting and warping into something entirely different and terrifying; still Sharingan, but more twisted, more sinister... "Should I remind you of why...?"

Sasuke's eyes widened in terror as his mind was suddenly bombarded with dark images of memories past. Seconds afterwards the corridor echoed with the sounds of his anguished screams.

"Sasuke--No!" Naruto moved forward once more only to be blocked by Jiraiya. Before she could object to his continued interference, he was already going through hands signs at rapid speeds. Kneeling down quickly, he slammed his palm flat down on the floor. The surfaces of the corridor quickly began to warp and change, the hard paneling of the walls and floor transforming into soft, spongy tissue.

Kisame scowled in confusion, letting out a grunt of surprise as the floor seemed to be attempting to absorb his Samehada. He raised his foot, frowning as his sandal made a squelching sound as it broke free from its squishy bonds. "What the hell is this...?"

The same question went through the blonde's mind as she focused blue eyes on the Sannin in confusion.

"Whatever you do, Naruto..." he murmured quietly, his tone deathly serious. "Do not move." She froze instantly, doing as he commanded. Turning his attention back to the two Akatsuki members, Jiraiya allowed a dark smirk to form on his face. "Congratulations, boys," he replied. "You are now within the snare of Gamaguchi Shibari - the esophagus of the Great Fire Breathing Toad." The blonde behind him let out a gasp of surprise. "I assure you, no one's ever survived it."

Itachi remained silent, watching as the unconscious boy in his grip sunk slowly into the wall of flesh.

Behind him, his partner let out another grunt of frustration as the floor seemed intent on swallowing them up as well. "What the hell is this crap?!

"Kisame," he called. "It's time to go."

"Right!" The larger ninja yanked his blade out of the floor once more, following behind him as he darted off down the hall.

"You won't get away!" A determined scowl on his face, he willed the fatty flesh to rise up in pursuit of them.

Kisame hacked at the tentacles that rose up to ensnare them, his beady eyes widening in
apprehension as the walls ahead of them appeared to be getting more narrow at an alarming rate. "Hate to say this," he murmured. "But it looks like we might not make it out of this!"

Itachi didn't answer, letting at a breathless sound as his Sharingan spun wildly once more.

Jiraiya hadn't been too concerned when the pair vanished around the corner - after all, no one had ever escaped his Toad Mouth Bind - but when another loud explosion quickly followed, the Sannin knew it was cause for alarm. *They managed to escape...? Impossible!* Letting out a curse, he dashed around the corner, freezing in surprise at the sight of the gaping hole at the end of the hall, surrounded in a ring of black flames. "What the hell is this...? The Fire Toad is made of stone... nothing should be able to burn through..." He drew a scroll from the folds of his tunic, unfurling the long parchment to write out an intricate series of calligraphic kanji. After going through a series of seals, chakra seeped out of the scroll like a rolling fog, rising over the hole before drawing the mysterious black flames into the paper like a vacuum. Wasting no time, the old Sage re-rolled the parchment and tied it off with a string. *'I can study this mysterious attack of his later...' he murmured to himself, rising to his feet once more. 'But for now...'*

"Sasuke! Sasuke!" As he rounded the corner, this time at a more sedate pace, Jiraiya found his 'apprentice' standing at the wall where Sasuke had vanished, her face awash in panic and worry. Blue eyes fell on him, lighting up slightly in relief. "Ero-sennin! Where's Sasuke? Your toad gut did--"

"Relax," he murmured. "The kid's fine." Stomping his sandaled foot one time, the jutsu dispelled and the fatty walls vanished and returned to their normal state.

Naruto let out a sharp gasp, catching the limp body of the Uchiha boy before he collapsed to the ground. "Sasuke..." She gazed down at his bruised and beaten body, her eyes barely able to recognize the dull, unseeing eyes gazing back up at her. Shaking fingers reached out, closing his lids shut gently. She'd never seen him like this... not even in Nami. Before closing, the boy's eyes had been hazed over in pain... now, it was almost as if his mind had completely shut down! *'He's been totally trashed...!' Her mind recalled the vicious beating he received at the hands of the older Uchiha, causing an involuntary shudder to run through her. 'How could someone do this to his own brother...?*

Jiraiya gazed down at her and the myriad emotions skirting across her face and in her eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off when a kunai flew out of nowhere, imbedding itself in the wall between them. "Hm?"

The blonde blinked, a free hand going for her weapons pouch. They both turned as a figure jumped in through the hole left by Sasuke's chidori. Shining teeth and furry brows quickly came into view as none other than Maito Gai charged towards them, a orange leg warmer-covered leg raised to deliver a powerful kick. *'DYNAMIC...'*

Jiraiya's expression quickly shifted from surprise to horror as he realized he was the Taijutsu master's intended target. "Gai! Gai, no... wait---urk!"

"ENTRY!!!" Gai's sandaled foot collided with the Sannin's face, sending him spinning backwards. The Jounin chuckled, opening his eyes to witness his opponent's defeat only to pale when the identity of said person was revealed. "Ji-ji-ji-raiya-sama?!"

Naruto regarded them both with an incredulous expression. "Morons..."
"Ah... ha ha, Jiraiya-sama... I thought you were an enemy...! I couldn't really see you clearly, you know... I was trying to avoid the effects of Itachi's Sharingan..."

The Sannin twitched, holding a handkerchief to his swollen nose. "That's the best apology you can come up with?!"

Gai laughed in embarrassment.

"Never mind you - what about Sasuke?" Naruto cut in, her attention still on that of her unresponsive teammate. She was certain he'd been placed under some sort of Genjutsu, but nothing she'd tried to rouse him had worked. "Why won't he wake up?"

"That jutsu Itachi used was no ordinary Genjutsu," Jiraiya murmured, frowning.

The younger Jounin beside him nodded, his expression solemn as he studied the boy's vacant expression. "It looks like the same one he used on Kakashi," he mused.

Naruto froze. "He got Kakashi-sensei, too?"

Jiraiya's frown deepened. "Gai, I need you to take Sasuke to the hospital." The taijutsu master nodded and as he reached down and lifted the boy onto his back, the Sage let out a heavy sigh. "I feel partly responsible for this... I admit I indulged the kid and his need for vengeance, but I let the fight go on far too long..."

"What now?" Naruto asked. "We are going after them, right?"

He glanced back at her, his expression incredulous. "Don't be stupid," he snapped. "Of course we're not - it took enough just to get them away from you!"

The blonde bristled and stood up, glaring back up at him. "And yet Sasuke still got hurt! All 'cuz of me!"

~ "The way I felt that day, the day my family was murdered... I don't ever want to feel that way again." ~ She remembered the words he had spoken that day so clearly. His whole body seemed to scream out all the pain, frustration, and desperation he was feeling at that moment. Naruto couldn't recall a time she had ever seen him more open. ~ "I don't want any more of my precious people to die." ~

She lowered her head, biting her lip to contain her own frustration - her own feelings of helplessness. "Do you really expect me to sit and do nothing?!"

Jiraiya frowned down at her. "You'll do what your sensei tells you!"

Blue eyes shot back up at him in alarm and the blonde reeled back as if struck.

Gai placed a hand on her head, giving her a sympathetic look. She tensed briefly at the contact before slumping her shoulders despairingly. "It's all right, Naru-san," he said softly. "I know it's difficult to stand by while a comrade is injured. You feel helpless... powerless..." He trailed off, his mind summoning up images of his own student, crying out in pain as his limbs were crushed by sand.
"G-Gai-sensei..."

He turned back to her, a small smile to coming to his face. "Stay with Jiraiya-sama and train yourself to become strong," he said. "Strong enough to protect yourself." He paused, allowing his smile to turn into a wide grin. "Lee and Neji would be most upset to learn you were hurt!"

To the two older ninja's surprise, the blonde froze, a rosy pink tint spreading across her cheeks. "Lee?" She paused, her expression quickly shifting to confusion. "And Neji, too??"

The Taijutsu master nodded, filing her reaction away to ponder over later. "They've both decided that they wish to become your rivals!" He grinned again, his teeth giving off a shiny 'ping!'.

At the mention of the word 'rivals' Naruto's face fell in exasperation. "Great..." Why'd they have to be rivals? Couldn't they be friends instead? Boys! Even though she'd pretended to be one for years, she understood them even less than she did girls!

Oblivious to her consensation, Gai continued on. "Ah, and before I go, Naru-san, I have something to give to you. It will surely assist you in your training."

At the mention of training, the blonde instantly perked up. Something to help her? And from Maito Gai - a master of Taijutsu? "Really? What is it?"

The Taijutsu master continued grinning, reaching into his vest to pull out a long stretch of shiny green material. Upon closer inspection it was revealed to be an exact duplicate of the jumpsuit that both he and Lee wore.

Jiraiya gaped in horror, his face going deathly pale. "Behold!" Gai crowed, waving the garment back and forth. "It's the Ultimate must-have for any ninja! It's streamlined, form-fitting, breathable, machine-washable, and very stlyish if I do say so myself!" His teeth pinged brightly once more. "It has assisted both Lee and I in our Youthful training! Wear it 24/7 and you'll never look back! Your Shining spirit of Youth will surely flourish!"

Naruto gazed up at him eagerly, her eyes sparkling with hope. "Do you really think so?" Gai handed her the suit complete with a Good Guy pose, earning a squeal of delight.

Behind them, the Toad sage grimaced in mild disgust, his mind conjuring up images of his apprentice dressed in that horrid jumpsuit along with Gai. He could envision the blonde parroting his bizarre - and nowhere near as flashy and cool as his own - poses and his face paled even more. "Ugh..." Squinting his eyes shut tightly, he willed the two of them from his mind, replacing them with Naruko in the standard Oiroke no Jutsu pose. A lecherous grin spread across his face as he let out a sigh in satisfaction. "Aahhh... much better..."

Gai glanced over at him, blinking in confusion. "Jiraiya-sama?"

Taking note of the expression on his face, Naruto grimaced in distaste. "I don't even wanna know..." Turning her head, she turned her attention back to the pale face of her teammate. "He'll... be okay...?" She gazed up at the Sage, her eyes hopeful. "Won't he?"

Jiraiya was silent a long moment. "He will be," he said finally. "Once we find the woman we're
looking for."

Gai paused, his eyes widening. Was he serious? "You mean...?"

Naruto tilted her head in confusion, a little startled at the determined expression that settled on the old voyeur's tattooed face. "That's right..."

ooo

Miles away from them, a buxom blonde walked slowly down an empty corridor with a suitcase in hand. Reaching her destination, she reached for a door and pushed it open to meet the gaze of another woman, a younger brunette holding a small pink pig her arms. With a confident smirk, she set the case down revealing a ridiculously large amount of cash.

The brunette's eyes widened comically and she let out a screech of surprise. "Gyaaaaahhh!! What're you planning to do with all that cash?!"

The blonde glanced up at her with a smirk on her face and a gleam in her eye. "I can feel it, Shizune," she chortled. "This is it... today's gonna be my lucky day!"

The brunette and the pig exchanged worried glances before heaving identical sighs of dismay.

ooo

Jiraiya let out a sigh before allowing a smirk to spread across his face. "Yup," he chuckled. "The Legendary Mistress of Slugs and medical genius, Tsunade-Hime."

Gai let out a gasp of awe. "Do you think she'll---" He paused, sparing the young blonde a glance before turning his attention back to the Sannin. "Yes, well... I wish you luck..."

Naruto stood in silence a few moments, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "Will you tell Lee I said hi...?" Gai blinked at her and she chuckled uneasily, running a hand through unruly bangs. "And Neji, too... I guess?"

The Joun grinned, giving her the Good Guy pose. "Will do!" he said cheerily, his teeth near blinding in their grinning intensity. "Good luck to both of you!" Turning away, he crouched down slightly, vanishing from sight with a powerful leap.

She watched them go, her mind a jumble of emotions, always coming back to back to one single thought. 'Sasuke...'

ooo

Elsewhere, the two Akatsuki members bounded across through the forest, seemingly not thhe least bit discouraged by their recent defeat.

"So," Kisame said casually. "What's our next move?"

The elder Uchiha was silent a few moments, his expression blank despite the perspiration standing out on his pale face. "There's no rush to collect our target..." he murmured quietly.

The taller ninja shrugged. "Fine by me..." he grunted. He gazed over at his partner, his expression
thoughtful. "I s'pose you'll prob'ly need to rest, eh? What with using those eyes of yours so much..."

"Yeah..." Itachi kept his gaze ahead, his crimson pupils muting to a dull, charcoal gray. "We'll wait... for now..."

ooo

Orochimaru let out a hiss of pain, biting his lip against the fresh onslaught of pain rushing up his arms. "Damn that old man..." Memories of his battle atop the stadium rushed through his mind and the ninja let out another curse at his failure. "My arms..." His arms trembled, their discolored pallor making them seem as though they belonged to that of a corpse. "They feel as if they're on fire...!"

The door to his chamber opened slowly and Kabuto stepped in, his glasses gleaming in the dim candlelight. "Orochimaru-sama..."

Yellow eyes focused on him, narrowing. "So, you've returned, Kabuto?"

The young ninja nodded, his expression solemn. "I've done my research..." He paused, faltering slightly. "But... I can't seem to find anything to help with your pain..."

Orochimaru snarled in frustration. "This is beyond even your abilities..." he murmured. His eyes narrowed even further. "What I require is a master in the healing arts."

Kabuto tilted his head, thoughtful. "By the tone of your voice, I take it you already have someone in mind?"

"There is only one person and one person only," A smirk spread across the Hebi-Sannin's pale face. "My old teammate... Tsunade..."

ooo

Naruto trudged down the dusty road, her blue eyes lacking their usual luster. Her mind kept replaying the day's past events, bombarding her brain and heart with the knowledge of what had befallen her companions back in Konoha. 'Kakashi-sensei... and Sasuke... they were both trying to help me... protect me...' Whether Sasuke had truly come to help her, or fight his brother was debatable, but the blonde had no energy to get into semantics. Some weirdo in a cloak had entered the village in search of her and had been confronted by her sensei. Somehow her teammate had gotten wind of the fight - and most likely the fact that Kakashi had been beaten - and had tracked them down to prevent them from striking again.

~ "...I don't ever want to feel that way again." ~ Sasuke had told her back during their fight with Gaara. ~ "I don't want any more of my precious people to die." ~

'It's like I'm abadoning them...' she thought to herself, moving one foot in front of the other as if it were a conscious effort she struggled to make. 'This... this is all my fault!'

Walking a few paces behind her, Jiraiya studied the blonde, feeling unsettled by her defeated posture. Surely this couldn't be the same spitfire blonde that accosted him in front of the bathhouse all those weeks ago! "Say, kid..." Naruto paused, turning her attention to him. He paused, rubbing his neck. "There's somethin' I've been meaning to ask you... about Sasuke."
Blue eyes blinked up at him curiously. Ignoring the memories dredged up by the thought of how often he'd been fixed with such a look in the past, he stopped directly in front of the blonde, studying her carefully. "Are you an' him..." He raised his hand and extended his pinky finger, waving the digit meaningfully. "An' item...?"

The blonde jerked, her eyes going wide as her brain processed his query. Moments later, her face reddened and she let out a screech of outrage. "WHAAAAAT?!" she yowled. "Where'd the HELL did you get that idea...?"

At least she wasn't depressed anymore... The Sage held back a grin, facing her with a thoughtful expression. "No... hm?" he asked, rubbing his chin absently. "You seemed like you were having a moment back there... Then again..." He paused to consider the thought, well aware of the trembling genin behind him. "You were all twittery over Gai's student, too."

"Twi-twittery..." Naruto's face reddened again, although due to an emotion other than anger. "I was not!" she objected hotly. "Lee an' I aren't like that...!"

"Oh?" Jiraiya grinned. "Then what about Gai's *other* student? A little frog told me the two of you were having lunch together." The blonde let out a little eep of surprise and he let out a theatrical gasp. "Oh, Naruto, Naruto... *three* young men at the same time?" He paused, holding a hand to his chest as he staggered backwards a step. "You're a girl after my own hear--" He stopped with a blink of surprise, ducking the large rock that was suddenly hurtled his way. "Now, now, kiddo, no need to get violent!"

Three guys? Just what kind of girl did he think she was? She didn't have time for boys - not while there was training to be done! Flushing in anger and embarassment, Naruto fixed the old lecher with a scowl as she brought her hands together in the sign of the Dog. "Pervy old goat! I'll call Gamabunta-jiisama!"

This time it was Jiraiya's turn to 'eep' as he waved his hands frantically. "N-no, no! Don't do that!" Wasting no time, the old ninja turned tail and ran, leaving a trail of dust behind him.

Naruto quickly gave chase, steam coming out of her ears. "Then hold still and take it like a man, Ero-Sennin you jerk!" she growled. "KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!!"

"AAAAIIIIIEEEEEEEE!!!"

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The pair arrived to the next village fairly quickly - the impromptu chase had enabled them to cover a considerable amount of ground, after all - and Naruto's eyes widened in surprise at the most startling sight. The buildings were decorated with streamers and lanterns, and the wide open streets were bustling with people laughing and smiling and enjoying themselves.

Jiraiya grinned down at the young girl beside her, taking in the open expression of awe and wonder on her face. "Ya like it?" he asked. "I bet you never seen anything like this back in Konoha..."

Naruto's blue gaze remained focused on all the merry-makers, feeling an underlying sense of wariness. She'd always made it a happen to make herself scarce during any festivals in the village. No matter what happy event was being celebrated at that particular time, someone always got it into their head that it was high-time to teach the Kyuubi-brat a lesson. However, standing in
this new town, Naruto had to remind herself that this was not Konoha. No one made faces at her, spat at her, threw rocks or stones at her and called her monster; in fact, no one really seemed to be paying that much attention to her at all.

It was very strange.

"What's all this for?" she asked.

"It's a festival," he answered. "A celebration of the Summer Harvest, I think..." He paused, scratching his head. "Never was too observant of the holidays..."

The blonde listened with half an ear, watching as a group of young children ran by with bags of koi fish and paper nets. "I never went to any of the festivals," she admitted quietly.

Jiraiya's expression softened before he faced her with a grin. "Well then, now's your chance." The blonde blinked at him, letting out a 'huh?' of confusion. "Go on. Have fun!"

Blue eye's lit up eagerly before the kunoichi seemed to come back to her senses, frowning slightly. "Hold on there, Ero-sennin!" she exclaimed. "There's no time!"

"Course there is," he countered. "Why wouldn't there be?"

"Have you forgotten already?" she scowled. "We're s'posed to be lookin' for that Tsunade-lady!"

He sighed heavily. "Kid, finding Tsunade is going to take time." He frowned thoughtfully. "She has a habit of being hard to track when she doesn't want to be found..."

She blinked back at him. "She's a missing-nin?"

"No, no... she's still a ninja of the Leaf, but she got permission to stay outside of the village from the Sandaime." They both fell briefly into silence at the mention of the deceased Hokage before Jiraiya continued. "Now we need her back."

Naruto remembered the words he'd spoken to her and Gai. ~ "He will be," ~ he'd said. ~ "Once we find the woman we're looking for." ~

"Because she's a medical genius?"

"That's right," he answered. "The thing is, she travels a whole lot. I know she hasn't left the country, but she could still be anywhere."

"If that's true," Naruto frowned. "Then my time could be better spent training."

Fixing her with a bored look, the Sage brushed her words off with a dismissive wave. "Yes, yes, your training..." At her frown he rolled his eyes and sighed. "All right then, lesson #2... you ready?"

She nodded eagerly, reaching into her pack to pull out the green travesty Gai had given her earlier.

Jiraiya paled almost instantly. "Oh God no, put that away!" he exclaimed. Blinking in confusion, the blonde did as asked and he let out a sigh of relief. "Okay, this lesson's a simple one... Let's see
Curious to what the old ninja had in mind, Naruto reached into her pack once more, pulling out a fat, toad-shaped wallet. Jiraiya's eyes widened in surprise. She actually carried that much money on her? "My Gama-chama...?" At the sight of his hand held out expectantly, she frowned, clutching it to her chest protectively like a pet or small toy. "What for?"

"Because money can get you into trouble if you're not careful with it."

"I'm always careful..." she countered. "And besides, you're the one who told me to take it out anyway."

The Sage paused, scratching his head absently. "Yes, well... you can never be too careful... You're not in Konoha anymore... who knows what can happen!"

"That's true..."

"Of course it's true! So, being the caring, wonderful sensei that I am, I have decided to guard your precious... Gama-chama," He succeeded in not chortling at the name. How old was she again? Five? "And keep it from harm."

The blonde fixed him with a skeptical look, shoving the wallet back into her bag. "Nice try, Ero-Sennin," she remarked dryly. "Just because I was the 'Dead Last' in my Academy class, doesn't mean I'm stupid."

'Damn... she's a slick one...' "Hehe... you've got it all wrong, kid! I'm just tryin' to look out for you!" he explained. "After all... this is a busy place... there's plenty of people who'll do their damnedest to take advantage of a little country mouse new to the big city."

"A fool and his money are soon parted', right?" she asked, giving him a knowing look. "I bet you're speaking from experience, aren't you...?"

He flushed in embarrassment, only to quickly recover and grimace at being so easily outwitted by a 12 year old. 'Brat's too smart for her own good...' "I never said that!" he protested loudly. "Sheesh, kid, you're somethin' else..."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"It means," Jiraiya said slowly. "That you need to loosen up. Have a little fun. There is a festival goin' on in case you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten," she said crossly. "No more than I've forgotten that my teammates are hurt 'cuz of some weirdos who were after me!" A few passersby gave her weird looks, but as they were nothing she wasn't used to, she ignored them.

Coming to a stop, Jiraiya gave her a studying look. A few moments later he looked away, rubbing the back of his neck with a tired sigh. "Look, kid," he breathed, sounding much older than his years. "It's not you that they're really after..." She blinked in confusion and the old ninja almost had to force himself to continue. After all, she deserved to know the truth, didn't she? "They're part of an organization called Akatsuki...and they want your tenant... or more specifically its power..."

Blue eyes widened and paled as she digested the knowledge he'd given her. She was a target of this
Akatsuki because she housed the spirit of the Kyuubi. "So... Kakashi-sensei got hurt because they were looking for what's *inside* of me...?" Once again people were being caused to suffer because of the creature sealed within her. Her teacher's sensei had died sealing the fox inside of her. Why would he put himself at risk to save her?

"We in Team 7 do not abandon friends, Naruto. You forgot that already?"

Kakashi had never once shown her any resentment for being vessel to the Kyuubi no Youko; she knew this. And though she also knew she was by no means at fault for its actions - then or now - that didn't make the guilt she felt diminish at all.

'Sasuke... did he know...? she found herself wondering. 'Did he came to help me or fight Itachi...?'

Jiraiya's voice brought her out of her thoughts and she frowned as she struggled to focus on his words once more. "It doesn't really matter how or why it happened--"

"Yes, it does matter!" she exclaimed, stopping to glare back at him. "It's all because of that stupid--" Her voice broke and she bit back a curse, furious at the familiar burning sensation at the back of her eyes. She wouldn't... not now! Not here! Turning sharply on her heel, Naruto ducked her head and bolted, vanishing into the crowd.

The Gama-Sennin let out a sharp curse, his eyes widening in surprise. "Naruto!" Wasting no time, he took off after her. 'Damn it...!' Prying no mind to the bodies knocking and shoving against her, Naruto continued running with her head down, cursing herself for her weakened resolve. She'd promised herself years ago... no matter how bad, how frustrating, how hopeless the situation got, she'd face it head on with no weakness and no regrets. 'I will not hide. I will not run away.' Hadn't that been her nindo? Yet here she was, looking for a place to hide like a scared little girl.

She was furious at herself, furious at her failure, her weakness, furious at the hot liquid leaving a trail down her cheeks. More than anything she was furious at the being that resided in the seal on her stomach. 'Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid fox!' A sob caught in her throat and she forced it down, pushing herself onward. Her eyes stung from her tears and her vision wavered. As she blindly rounded the corner, she ran head on into a soft, warm wall. Her balance completely thrown off, she let out a startled yelp as she crashed backwards to the ground.

"Hey! Watch it, you stupid brat!"

Naruto opened her eyes, staring upwards at the two men glaring down at her angrily. The taller of the two held an empty waffle cone in hand, its contents now making its home smeared across his white, expensive-looking suit. Swiping her face with a sleeve, the blonde scrambled quickly to her feet, bowing in apology. "I'm sorry! I didn't me--"

"A simple sorry ain't gonna cut it, kid!" the second man snarled. "You ruined the boss's suit!"

She blinked. "Boss?" Was this guy actually someone important? "It was an accident..."

The man sneered. "One that's gonna cost ya." He gestured to the taller man, who was now scowling at the dark stain on his clothing. "Boss Akoki used to be a Chuunin in Iwagakure no
Sato. He's gonna show you the true meaning of pain!" The ex-ninja glanced up at her with eyes promising violence and Naruto tensed in preparation. "Then you'll really be sorry!"

"Yeah, she'll be sorry all right..." A hand landed on Naruto's shoulder from behind and she tensed, glancing upwards at the red tattooed face of the Toad Sage smirking at her two 'companions'. "Sorry that she had to waste time with a Iwa-Chuunin flunkie and his little stooge."

The two men bristled in anger. "What's that?"

Jiraiya merely glanced down at the blonde in front of him, grinning widely. "All right kiddo, you really wanna train?" he asked. "Here's lesson #3." Stepping out from behind her, he held out his hand, palm face upwards. "I'm gonna teach this guy a lesson in manners just one hand."

"The hell you will!" Akoki reached into his suit jacket, drawing out a switchblade. Rushing towards them with an angry yell, he raised the blade to strike.

Naruto watched with wide eyes as Jiraiya stepped in front of her with his hand still extended. Studying it closer, the blonde watched as a spinning blue orb chakra materialized in his hand. Taking a step forward, Jiraiya met the ex-nin head on, ramming the orb into his chest. Akoki let out a strangled cry as he was suddenly knocked backwards and across the street, crashing into a vendor's cart before quickly succumbing to unconsciousness.

She stared in awe, her expression mirrored by many of the spectators lining the street. 'Wha... what the hell was that...'

Akoki's 'yes-man' turned to Jiraiya trembling as his eyes widened in recognition. "Now I recognize you..." he murmured fearfully. The Gama-sennin turned to him with a bored expression. "You... You're Jiraiya... of the Legendary Three!"

A wide grin split his face as the white haired ninja nodded his head. "That's right," he replied. "So you an your 'Boss' better remember - when a young lady offers you her apologies, it's be in your best interest to accept them!"

The man gulped nervously. "Y-yes, sir!" He turned to the blonde, giving a quick bow. "Forgive us, miss!" Without waiting for an apology, he rushed over to his fallen companion, bodily lifting him and dashing away.

Naruto only blinked again, still trying to figure out what exactly had happened. Oblivious to her consternation, the surrounding bystanders laughed good-naturedly, breaking out into a round of applause.

Jiraiya watched their departure with an amused chortle, glancing down to spot the wallet one of the two had left behind. Upon inspection of its contents, he removed a considerable amount of money and handed it to the owner of the cart that had been destroyed by the ex-ninja's landing. "Here you are," he said gallantly. "This should take care of the damages done to your booth..."

The old man gaped at the amount being offered him, accepting the bills with trembling hands. "Y-you're too kind, Jiraiya-sama...!" he exclaimed. "Is there anything I can do for you...?"

The Sannin paused, spotting the large supply of balloons the man had sold peeking out of the wreckage. An intrigued smile spread across his face. "Why yes, as a matter of fact there is!"
Both Naruto and the vendor blinked in confusion. "Eh...?"

~ End Chapter 23
Chapter 24 - The Hokage's Legacy

Chapter Summary

Training with Jiraiya continues

Chapter 24

"Hard at work already, I see. Good going, kiddo."

Naruto craned her head upwards, spotting the grinning ninja standing directly beneath her. Entertaining the notion of dropping something heavy on his head briefly, she disrupted the flow of chakra in her feet that held her in place on the tree branch above him. Allowing gravity to take its claim, she twisted her body around to land neatly on the ground. She fixed him with an appraising look as she rose to her feet, smirking slightly. "Well, at least you're not as late as Kakashi-sensei is..."

Jiraiya snorted. "Impatient brat," he muttered. "I'll have you know I spent the morning conducting some very important research."

"Research, huh? That wouldn't have happened to be near any of the bath houses, would it?" The old ninja made a face and Naruto snickered.

"What a rude little imp you are," Jiraiya sighed in feigned disappointment. Inwardly, however, he was glad that the genin seemed to be in better spirits. The little mini-breakdown she'd experienced the day before had really had him worried. "And to think I actually planned on starting your training today..."

"Really?" Blue eyes lit up in excitement and Jiraiya fought to hold back the grin threatening to spread across his face. "C'mon, Ero-sennin! What're you planning on teaching me?"

"Hmm... I dunno... I'm not sure if you can handle it..."

"I can too!" she protested. "I learned Kuchiyose no Jutsu, didn't ?"

He had to admit she had a point there. The sage studied her carefully. "This isn't like the Kuchiyose," he said. "This one's very complex." When the blonde's expression didn't change, he smirked slightly. "But... I guess you can handle it..."

"You bet I can handle it!" she exclaimed jumping up and down excitedly. "What's it called? What's it do? What rank is it? What type is it?"

Jiraiya grinned at all of the surprisingly profound questions the blonde fired at him in rapid succession. She really was excited about this, wasn't she? Deciding not to keep her waiting any longer, he held out his hand for her inspection. "Watch."

Naruto did as he asked, eyes widening as the same blue orb of chakra appeared in his upturned
Once it was stabilized, the old ninja turned from her towards the tree in which she had been hanging from previously. He slammed the orb into the old bark, leaving behind a grinding, gaping hole.

Turning back to meet the girl's stunned gaze, the Toad Hermit's grin widened. "That was the Rasengan," he answered.

"The Rasengan..." Naruto stared at the attack's handiwork before turning her gaze back to him once more. "How's it work?"

"I can't just tell you how it works," Jiraiya chided. "You hafta figure it out for yourself... it's part of the training."

Naruto pouted slightly but quickly relented once she saw the reasoning behind his words. "Oh, okay."

The Sannin nodded once before continuing. "Though I should warn you," He paused, his expression turning surprisingly serious. "This jutsu took the Yondaime three whole years to master."

The blonde's face paled in shock. "WHAAAT...?!!" Was he serious?! "Three years?!" she screeched. "I don't have that kinda time!"

To her surprise, the old ninja only laughed. "Relax, kid," he replied. "It only took him 3 years because he's the one who created it."

"Yondaime-sama created it?" And he was teaching it to her...?

Pretending to be oblivious to the open expression of wonder on the young kunoichi's face, Jiraiya continued his explanation as if nothing was amiss. "That's right," he said. "And he showed it to me in three steps." He paused again, allowing her to absorb that piece of information. "Once you master those three steps, you'll have the Rasengan mastered in no time." A grin spread across his face once more. "So, whaddya say?"

Naruto remained silent, frowning thoughtfully. The Rasengan... Yondaime had created the jutsu in three years. Could she really master it in such a short amount of time? She glanced over at the tree, surveying the damage done by the attack. Turning her attention back to the old ninja, her eyes shone with determination. "What's the first step?"

'Atta girl,' Jiraiya smiled inwardly. Reaching into a bag at his feet, he drew out a water-filled balloon and placed it in her hand. "All right," he said. "Step #1... I want you to pop that balloon." The blonde blinked up at him. He smirked, reaching down for another balloon. "Watch." Holding the balloon out for her inspection, he watched her reaction as it began to stretch and contort as if the water inside were struggling to break out and escape. A few seconds later the balloon burst, water trickling out of his hand to soak the ground at his feet.

Blue eyes widened in surprise and confusion. "Ah--how did you---?"


He was leaving? Now? "Hey, where are you going?"
He glanced back over his shoulder, his expression casual. "Back to town, where else?" he answered.

Naruto stared after him, her expression incredulous. "Aren't you supposed to stay and supervise or something?" she asked. "Sensei...?"

The toad sage sighed heavily, fixing her with a slight scowl of annoyance. Hadn't he explained to her that she had to do this on her own? "I hope you don't expect me to hold your hand through this," he replied. The blonde blinked at him in shock but he continued on. "You became a ninja of the Leaf the moment you accepted that hitai-ate you wear on your head. You should be able to take care of yourself."

A brief flash of hurt skirted across the young girl's face and Jiraiya hated it, almost as much as he hated how quickly the emotion was buried beneath a mask of annoyance. How long had it taken, he wondered, for her to learn how to mask her emotions so quickly? Knowing now was not the time to ponder such things, he turned attention back the blonde who was regarding him with an angry scowl.

"I've been looking after myself since I was 5," she said quietly, the anger discernable in her tone. Who was he to tell her how to behave? He didn't even know her! 'Stupid Ero-sennin...!' Had she, Jiraiya wondered. Sarutobi may have left the blonde under the Copy Ninja's care, but didn't he have a responsibility for her as well? 'Wonder what you'd say if you could see us now, Mina...' he thought idly. 'Would you be disappointed...?'

Mistaking his silence for apathy, Naruto's scowl deepened as she turned her back on him. "Fine," she growled out. "Go back to town - I don't care. I'll have this jutsu down before you know it. Just watch!" She gripped the balloon in hand, stalking away to the other side of the tree. "I don't need you or anyone else to hold my hand. I've been doing just fine on my own!"

At a loss for words, Jiraiya turned away as well, continuing his trek back. He had told himself in the beginning when he agreed to train her that he couldn't allow himself to coddle her, but he was now starting to wonder the validity of it. Was he doing it to protect her or himself...? He had been so quick to accuse Kakashi of neglecting her growth, but in a way wasn't he just as guilty?

'I'm sorry, kiddo...' he thought to himself. 'But this is how it's gotta be for now...' He glanced back over his shoulder, the blonde now only an orange blur across the clearing. A sad smile drifted across his face. 'He would've liked to be with you... teaching you his jutsu... but if you're anything like him, I know you'll do just fine...'

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Sakura took a seat down beside the small hospital bed, gazing down quietly at the pale young man currently occupying it. She didn't speak a word, opting instead to reach out slowly to brush his bangs out his eyes. If she had expected a response from him, she was sadly disappointed. The boy didn't so much as react; his pale face remained lax in sleep.

Green eyes watered before Sakura regained her bearings, biting down on her lip to maintain her composure. She had to be strong for the two of them now. It was the only way she knew of to help him.
Teammates look after each other, she'd said to him that day back in Nami no Kuni. It seemed like it was so long ago; had it only been a few months? ~ "If it’s not too much a bother, you can let me look after you, too..." ~ She could still remember the expression of surprise that had skirted across his face. She'd felt a thrill of joy that she'd managed to create a reaction that wasn't some form of annoyance or disdain. ~ "I know I’m not as strong as you guys, though, I know... but I figured I’d just let you know, because, you know... we’re teammates, like you said..." ~

~ "Hn... do whatever you want." ~

"Don't worry, Sasuke-kun," she whispered tenderly, allowing a ghost of a smile to skirt across her face. "I'm here... Everything's going to be fine, I promise..."

"Sakura-san?"

The pink-haired kunoichi blinked, whipping her head around to the hospital room door. There stood Rock Lee, his weight supported by a pair of crutches, gazing back at her with a look of surprise on his face that matched hers almost identically. "Lee-kun...?"

He recovered first, allowing a small smile to come to his face. He hobbled into the room slowly, gazing around the room. His eyes fell on the bed's occupant briefly before falling back to her. "I thought that I might find you here..." His expression softened. "I am sorry about Sasuke..."

She nodded briefly. "He was hurt badly," she murmured. "But even his injuries have healed, the doctors still can't wake him..." She gazed boy's lax face. "He's under some sort of Genjutsu." Genjutsu... the type of jutsu at which she was supposed to excel... What did that say about all the so-called training she had done?

Lee was silent a few moments. "Gai-sensei told me that Naru--" He paused briefly to correct himself. "Naru-san has gone to find a healer for him."

The kunoichi blinked in surprise. "She has?" Was that why she had left the village so suddenly? 'Naru-kun...' She clutched her hands together, relief and hope feeling her. "Then I know he'll be all right..."

The injured ninja studied her. 'You have a lot of faith in her... 'He glanced over at Sasuke once more. 'And in him as well...'

Turning her attention back to Lee, Sakura blinked in confusion at the sight of him staring at the floor. "Oh, Lee-kun!" The older boy blinked, turning his attention back to her. "I'm sorry for being so rude - did you want to sit down?"

An embarrassed flush spread across his face as he shook his head, forcing a grin to his face. "That is all right, Sakura-san. I am fine standing..."

She wasn't sure if it from spending so much time with a particular blonde, but Sakura was certain she knew a fake smile when she saw it. "Something's bothering you..." she murmured quietly. Lee's dark gaze went to the floor once more. "Lee...?"

He swallowed, forcing his gaze up to meet hers once more. "You..." He paused, trying to decide on what to say. "You care very much for Sasuke-san, don't you...?"

Sakura blinked in surprise, a startled blush spreading across her cheeks. "Yes," she's
answered. "He's my teammate... and I... I've had feelings for him for a long time..."

"Does he return them?"

Green eyes fell on the still Uchiha as conversations from the past filtered through her brain.

~ "We wouldn't want you to," ~

~ "It doesn't matter. You're my teammate. I'm supposed to look after you." ~

She gazed down at the floor, her eyes darkening in confusion. "I don't know," she answered honestly. "Sasuke-kun has a goal that he's determined to accomplish... he won't let anything get in his way..."

~ "I don't care about becoming a Chuunin; I'm only here to fight strong opponents. So stay out of my way." ~

'...Even me.' Her expression saddened at the less than fond memory. His behavior towards her during the Exams had been so cold, so hateful... though it was nothing compared to how he had treated Naruto. The memory served only to remind her that even though there were moments that gave her hope that she still had a chance with her beloved Sasuke-kun, it was quite possible that the Uchiha only saw her as a someone for whom he was responsible. Sometimes, Sakura found herself wondering if he'd ever see her as anything more than a distraction, a burden.

~ "You shouldn't hafta worry about being on the frontlines, Sakura-chan. You're still important to the team, no matter what." ~

Sakura wanted to smile at the memory of her teammate's encouraging words, but one refused to form. 'It's not the same, though...' she thought to herself, her gaze darkening in sadness. 'Must I always be the one left behind, only to watch you both get hurt...?'

Though he couldn't read her thoughts, the pain on the young kunoichi's face was a clear as day. Lee gazed at her, his heart clenching tightly as his thoughts mirrored her own. There was nothing he could do for her; nothing that would bring that beautiful light back to her eyes. 'Sakura-san...' He lifted his hand to reach out to her, but lost his nerve, letting it fall limply to his side before clenching it into a fist. He lowered his gaze to the floor, taking a deep breath before speaking. "Someone once said to me..." Sakura glanced up at him, her expression curious. "That if you are willing to give up on what you want so easily... it must not have been something you truly wanted..."

"Lee..." Considering his words, her eyes brightened in understanding. 'He's right...' she told herself. 'Am I really willing to give up on Sasuke after everything...?'

Her fight in the Chuunin Exams Preliminaries against Ino flashed in her mind.

~ "Those who abandon their teammates are worse than trash!" ~ she had quoted to her.

"No, I won't give up..." She paused as she gazed at him, clenching her hands to her heart once more. 'I'll wait as long as it takes..."

Behind her, Lee smiled sadly. 'So will I, Sakura-san...' he thought to himself. 'So will I...'
The sun had had drifted well past the mid-day point by the time Naruto dropped to her knees, panting heavily in exertion. The balloon she had been attempting to pop rolled out of her limp grasp, coming to a stop a few inches away. She gave it a baleful glare, wishing on some level that that was all it took to bring about its destruction. 'Stupid balloon...' she muttered to herself, wondering not for the first time whether or not there was some trick involved. Was this 'training' some sort of prank? Was the balloon really made out of some reinforced material that was impossible to pop? She wouldn't put it past the old Sannin to try such a ploy. Heck, she might've even considered it herself.

The older ninja's harsh words from that morning drifted back to the forefront of the blonde's mind, bringing a slight scowl to the blonde's face once more. 'Stupid Ero-sennin...' She visualized his turned back, wondering why it hadn't occcured to her to chuck the evil balloon at his smug head. Once again he had gotten her hopes up only to dash them quite expertly. Her scowl deepened. 'If I had known it was gonna be like this, I would've stayed in Konoha--' The thought trailed off as she remembered the piercing gaze and grinning maw of the two Akatsuki members. Her anger fizzled away almost instantly, replaced by tired resignation. Naruto rolled over onto her back, staring upwards into the clouds. 'But... more of my friends could've gotten hurt...' She remembered Sasuke's empty gaze and she frowned at the slight twinge she felt beneath her ribcage. 'I promised that I would protect everyone,' she thought to herself resolutely. Turning her head, blue eyes focused on the most-despised balloon once more. "So... if Yondaime could do this jutsu, so will I!" Her mind made up, Naruto planted her hands down on the ground, intent on pushing herself into a sitting position. Unfortunately, her weak limbs - no doubt overworked from her intense training - gave out halfway through the task, causing her to flop back down into the grass. Blue eyes blinked in surprise as a sudden rush of lethargia overcame her. "...right after I take this nap!" Closing her eyes, the blonde genin quickly succumbed to unconsciousness.

Naruto awoke some time later, a little bit stiff from lying sprawled out on her back but overall refreshed. Judging by the position of the sun, not too much time had gone by. Preparing to continue her training, the blonde made to get up only to be halted by two piercing yellow eyes gazing back at her in close proximity. Nearly overcome by the urgent need to attack, Naruto grabbed a kunai from her weapons pouch and made a move to attack--

"Meeowww..."

Blue eyes blinked, finally acknowledging those slanted eyes as belonging to the small Calico resting on her stomach. 'Just a cat...? Then why did I react like that...?' she wondered. The small feline merely gazed back at her, completely unperturbed by the kunai that had been up until that moment poised to strike. The genin settled, laughing slightly when she remembered her last encounter with an animal of the feline persuasion.

"Well, you're a bit nicer than Tora-kun... Although... we're not up in a tree you can push me out of..." She winced when she recalled how the spoiled little flea-bag had nearly caused her to drown.

The current cat in her company only let out a small purr before setting about the seemingly
important task of cleaning its paws. Naruto watched this for all of two seconds before gazing skyward once more, noting the position of the sun. "Well, at least I wasn't out too long," she murmured absently. "There's still time for me to figure this thing ou--" She moved to sit up once more, halting when she realized her little company prevented such an action. Fixing the cat with an expectant glance, she replied calmly, "Say, Neko-san, I'd hate to interrupt you and all, but you mind getting off?"

The cat fixed her with a look that seemed to suggest that it did in fact mind, but it acquiesced to her request nonetheless, turning its attention to her forgotten balloon.

'Figures...' Chuckled resignedly, Naruto moved towards the bag of remaining balloons. "Well, at least you're a playful one, ne?" she mused as she drew out another balloon to practice on. "I'd join you but I've gotta figure out how to pop this... thing..." Her words trailed off as her attention drifted to the cat once more. Oblivious to her scrutiny, the cat continued to entertain itself, batting the balloon back and forth along the grass between its paws. The water inside sloshed back and forth as its vessel was jostled along. Naruto stared at the cat a few moments more before turning her attention back to the balloon her hands. 'Is that it...? Is it really that simple?' All this time she had been using her chakra to will the balloon to burst, as if there were some form of telekinesis involved... and yet a stray cat had all but solved the riddle for her in a span of a few seconds! Excitement rushing through her, the blonde concentrated her chakra, channeling it into the balloon. Before long, the water within was swirling and churning, spinning back and forth, splashing and sloshing in and over itself. What seemed like an eternity later, the balloon finally succumbed under the strain, giving way with a loud pop. As water splashed across her face, the blonde gave out a loud, victorious laugh. "Ha ha, that's it! That's it!" Casting the balloon remains away, she lunged for the small feline, grasping it to her chest as she nuzzled it in gratitude. "You're a brilliant cat, Neko-san! Brilliant!"

The cat mewled in annoyance at being manhandled, pushing against her hold until it finally managed to break free. Jumping down to the ground, it bounded away.

Totatally unperturbed with its sudden departure, Naruto watched it go with a happy wave. "Bai bai, Neko-san!" she called. Once it was out of sight, she let out another squeal of joy and began to dance around the clearing excitedly. "All right! Now let's do it again!"

Hidden out of her view in a nearby tree, the old Frog Hermit watched the unfolding scene with a barely suppressed smile. The kid was progressing quickly, he mused to himself. It was no wonder she was known as Konoha's most Unpredictable Ninja. In the clearing, the little blonde executed a rather clumsy cartwheel and the old Sannin bit his lip to keep from laughing.

Uzumaki Narut-- no, Uzumaki Naru certainly was something else. 'She's gonna get this jutsu down in no time, just like I thought...' Jiraiya paused, allowing a small sigh to escape his lips as he gazed up at the clouds. 'Kid, if only you could see her now...' ooo

"See? Didja see it?"

Jiraiya resisted the urge to inform the blonde that he'd seen her pop the balloon the first time she'd done it as well as all the times after, but refrained seeing the pride and excitement shining in her bright blue eyes. Why ruin it for her? He studied the soaked remains of the popped balloon,
allowing a surprised grin to spread across his face. "Not bad, kid..." he exclaimed. "And it only took you a few days."

He had expected the blonde to continue beaming, boasting of her skill and potential--like some other ninja he was very familiar with--but instead her bright grin vanished, replaced by wary confusion. "Are you making fun of me?"

The old ninja blinked in confusion. "No..." he answered. The wariness in her expression vanished but the confusion remained. Had she thought he was being sarcastic? "Kid, I told you before this jutsu took the Yondaime 3 years to master... You've managed the first step in only a few days... that's amazing progress."

"Oh..."

Konoha's most Unpredictable Ninja indeed... the more time he spent in the blonde's company, the more it seemed that her personality was not all that he had pegged it to be. She had been loud and brash during their initial meeting, much like another blonde he had been familiar with. She had the reputation of being a prankster, and with her sharp wit, and quickness to laughter, Jiraiya had pegged the title be well earned. However, in his quick assessment of the girl, he had forgotten that not all smiles were genuine. 'The kid's definitely not all Ramen and sunshine...' he mused to himself. So much had happened to her in the last few weeks... The Akatsuki attack, the Hokage's death... In their conversations he had managed to glean that she'd been very close to the old man. Had she even had any time to properly grieve?

'Hn... what we need right now is a diversion... ' Remembering the festival that had been taking place upon their arrival to town, the old ninja was suddenly struck with inspiration. A smile spread across his tattooed face only to be subdued once he turned his gaze back to the blonde. "Tell you what, kiddo..." The blonde glanced back up at him, her expression curious. "Before we move onto the next step, we're gonna have a little fun--"

"Fun?" Naruto balked. "Ero-sennin--"

"I told you," he cut in sternly. "My name is Jiraiya." She only made a great show of rolling her eyes. He ignored her. "You need to loosen up. Stress'll only make your training harder. I told you that before, didn't I?" The young girl frowned. "C'mon," he sighed heavily. "Don't make me order you... Let's try to make this trip enjoyable, eh?"

Naruto debated a few seconds before finally relenting with a loud sigh. "Fine..." she muttered, ignoring his victorious smirk. "What're we gonna do...?"

Being the mistress of mischief-making that she was, she should have recognized the glint that entered the old man's eye. "Oh, don't you worry," he grinned amiably, resisting the urge to robs his hands together. "Just you wait and see."

She gazed back up at him, trying to determine just what it was the old voyeur had in mind when he said 'fun'. He did realize that she was still a minor, right? 'It should be all right...' she kept telling herself. 'After all, what the worst that can happen...?'

ooo

Naruto stared at the strange garment currently adorning her person, a look of absolute consternation etched upon her face. Was this some sort of joke? Did he really expect her to go out looking like
"Dirty old creep," she muttered in irritation, fighting a losing battle with the long, peculiar length of fabric held in her hands. "You tricked me!"

The door to their room opened up, and the second object of her ire poked his head in. A wide grin split his face at her attire, only to be tucked away once she turned to glare at him. "Tricked you?" he echoed. "And just how did I manage that?"

The blonde huffed in exasperation, flailing her arms as she gestured at her garment. "You never said anything about me wearin' this thing!" she exclaimed, still quite miffed at the events leading up to her current predicament. While she would have much rather been training, Jiraiya had insisted they take a break to enjoy the festival. She had agreed to go along with his plan, but then the crafty old dodger had gone and hidden her clothes while she had showered after her training, replacing it with a soft, white yukata. The hem and sleeves were lined with a stripe of blue and peach, and the garment itself was dotted with the occasional red spiral. Naruto had to admit that it was very nice, but she felt terribly awkward wearing it, far more than she had wearing Sakura's dress. Where on earth had he gotten it from anyhow?

She paused, taking note of the fact that the old ninja was still donned in his normal attire. She gaped, pointing an accusing finger his way. "An' why is it you're not changed?"

The Frog Hermit smirked at her. "There's nothing wrong with my clothes..." he said casually. "Sure, yours are okay for combat--" He paused, visualizing her attire. "Even if they are orange..." The blonde sputtered in outrage. "But for a festival... Girls your age wear kimono." A grin spread across his face once more as he gave her another once over. He had to admit she cleaned up quite nicely. Who knew the little loudmouth was really cute as a button? "You're s'posed to be festive!"

Naruto glanced away, slightly flustered. She gave the garment a critical once over, grimacing slightly at the limited range of movement. "I can't really move in this thing..." she complained. "How'm I supposed to fight if those cloaked guys come back...?"

Jiraiya gazed back at her, his expression sobering slightly. "Don't you worry. Nothing's bad gonna happen to you," he said. "I'll protect you."

The young girl's expression slipped away, replaced by awe and surprise.

He grinned at her once again, ruffling her hair playfully. "Well, c'mon now... aren't you ready to go yet?"

The blonde flushed, holding out the length of cloth she had been struggling with before his arrival. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

Blinking, the Sannin accepted the cloth, holding it out for his inspection. "Ahh, the obi..." he grinned. "Many have trouble with such things..."

She gazed up at him, skepticism evident in her expression. "And you don't?"

Jiraiya's grin widened as he wagged his brows suggestively. "Let's just say I've had a lot of experience with *handling* obi." The blonde only blinked at him in confusion. Realizing the suggestive joke may have been a bit over her head, he coughed and let out an embarrassed chuckle. "Ah well... what I mean to say is, I was a Jounin Sensei before I was a Super Wise Sannin," he continued. "This wouldn't be the first time I've had to help a young kunoichi with her
wardrobe."

Naruto blinked as she puzzled over his words. He had said before that he had taught the Yondaime as a youth, could that mean he'd had a genin team? "Wait--what were Yondaime-sama's teammates like?" she asked. "What happened to them?"

The old ninja's grin fell away, replaced with an expression that left him looking very old. "They became ninja..." he murmured cryptically. By the tone of his voice and expression on his face, the blonde knew well enough not to press the issue. Some memories were better left buried, after all. The sage cleared his throat uneasily, setting about the task of properly tying the blonde's obi. A few moments went by in silence before he stepped back to survey his handiwork. "Heh, good to know I still got the Hanhabi down," he chuckled lightly. The blonde twisted around to study the cute little bow sitting neatly at the base of her back. Jiraiya grinned once more. "Now, c'mon! The night's still young - let's go out and have some fun!"

Nodding her head dutifully, Naruto allowed Jiraiya to take her by the hand, only to let out a yip of surprise as she stumbled slightly in the unfamiliar geta. At the older ninja's chuckle, she stuck out her tongue in mild annoyance. "Shuddap, Ero-sennin, you jerk!"

ooo

Together the two of them walked through town, taking in the sight of all the activities taking place. There were vendors and shops of all sorts set up along the street, far more than Naruto could ever recall seeing in Konoha. She took in everything in silence, an open expression of awe on her face.

Jiraiya gazed down at her, a smile smirk slowly spreading across his face. 'Still just a kid...'

"Oh my, don't you two make quite the pair!" The two ninja glanced upwards, turning their attention to the old woman standing behind a small stand off to the side of the street. She waved them over, waving congenially. "Is this your first time at the festival?" Naruto nodded and she chuckled softly. "Well, my dear, you certainly are going to enjoy yourself - let me assure you!"

The blonde grinned absently, gazing at the woman's stand. A large multi-colored dial sat on the counter, along with a brightly colored sign reading something about a lotto.

"Oh, thinking about trying your luck in the lottery?" the woman asked. "You never know, you might just win the grand prize!"

Behind the genin, Jiraiya fought the urge to roll his eyes as she fished out her precious 'Gama-chama' to purchase a ticket. 'Didn't I warn you about being taken advantage of...?'

The old woman handed the young genin her ticket, smiling at her kindly as she gestured to the dial. "Why don't you give it a whirl?" The blonde obliged, giving the device a hard spin. "Good luck!"

All three watched with bated breath as the dial spun round and round. Seconds passed by as it finally came to a stop. Peering at it closely, six pair of eyes widened in surprise at the sight of the words 'Jackpot!' written in bright, bold letters.

Naruto let out a whoop of joy, jumping up and down excitedly. "I won, I won!"
"Yes, you did indeed!" the old woman exclaimed. "Congratulations!"

The old toad sage could only gawk as the blonde cheerfully accepted the jackpot prize - a large bag of money - grinning from ear to ear. 'Are you kidding me...?'

"Wow, Gama-chama's gonna be fit to burst!" She turned to gaze up at him, her eyes shining happily. "So, what's next?"

ooo

Drawing her attention away from a rack of ornamental masks - one resembling a fox had really caught her eye, but she had declined purchasing it due to the poor irony - Naruto found her gaze wandering to to the people surrounding her. A smaller group of children had been perusing the masks alongside of her before running off towards the little koi pond a vendor had set up some distance away. She briefly considered joining them when a cry of excitement from behind had her turning towards a young man and his daughter approaching an ice cream stand.

The little girl couldn't have been any older than Moegi, and she gazed up at the man with eyes bright in excitement. "Hey, Daddy!" she exclaimed. "Can I get two of those?"

The man followed her gaze to the popsicle featured on the vendor's menu, a wide grin spreading across his face. "Two, eh?" he questioned. "Are you sure you can eat both of those?"

His daughter giggled. "They're not both for me," she answered. "I want to bring one back for Mommy." She gazed up at him, her expression hopeful. "Do you think she'll like it?"

"I'm sure she will," he smiled back. "Strawberry is her favorite, you know."

"Mine, too!"

A small smile drifted to Naruto's face only to be overcome by a sense of wistfulness. Did she and Iruka-sensei look like that, she wondered, when they ate together at Ichiraku? 'He and Hokage-jiji were my first ever precious people,' she mused to herself. 'I wonder sometimes... what it would've been like if we were really family... like that girl and her dad...' As the pair made their purchases and departed, Naruto decided that buying one for herself wasn't such a bad idea. Turning to ask the Sannin if he wanted one, she started in surprise to find him nowhere in sight. "Ero-sennin...?" She paused, remembering him making some comment about a group of young women they'd passed earlier. She sighed heavily. 'Once a pervert, always a pervert...'

Approaching another stand selling grilled squid, the young man behind the counter smiled and gave her a greeting wave. "Hello there! What's a cute girl like you doin' here by yourself?"

The blonde blinked, glancing around curiously before pointing to herself in confusion. "Are you talking to me?"

The young man laughed. "And she's modest, too!" He chuckled, reaching down to hand her two squid fresh off the grill. "Here ya go!"

"Thank you!" she smiled, reaching for her Gama-chama.

"Oh, don't worry 'bout that," He waved her money away.
She blinked again at him, this time in surprise. "Do you mean it?" she asked. At his grinning nod, she grinned back. "Thanks a lot, Mister!"

The young man chuckled, tipping her a wink. "If that's all it takes to put a smile on that face..." At her embarrassed blush, his grin widened. What a cute kid she was; she was definitely going to turn heads when she got old enough. "Enjoy the festival, okay?"

Naruto nodded once again. "I will!" With a wave, she jogged off into the crowd once more. Studying her surroundings, she bit into one of the squids, letting out a squeal of delight at the taste. "It's good!"

"Ah, there you are!"

Naruto turned, blinking at the sight of the Frog Sannin standing behind her. "Where'd you go?"

"I could ask you the same question," he countered. "I looked up and you were gone." He raised his hand, offering her a popsicle - no doubt one from the stand she had left earlier. "Here ya go. Hope you like strawberry."

She stared at the frozen treat, a surprised flush spreading across her cheeks as she accepted it timidly. "Thanks..." She bit into it slowly, allowing a smile to spread across her face. "This is good, too..." She handed him the second squid. "Here."

The Sannin chuckled. "Strawberry and squid, huh? Interesting combination." Following her lead, he bit into it, grunting in approval. "You're right, though - it is good."

A chuckle escaped her throat as she continued eating her popsicle.

Studying her with a small smile, Jiraiya found himself relieved to find the sadness gone from the blonde's eyes. Sensing his scrutiny, she glanced back up at him curiously. He grinned once more. "Say, wanna go buy some sparklers?"

"Sure!"

ooo

Blue eyes regarded the small black spiral currently displayed on her palm. "Eh? What is this...?"

Jiraiya frowned slightly. "You don't get it?"

"What's to get?" she countered. "You drew on me."

The Sannin closed his eyes. "If I explain it to you, it defeats the purpose."

The kunoichi frowned in mild irritation. "You can't give me a little hint?"

He sighed, contemplating. "Okay..." He reopened his eyes, studying her face carefully. "Remember when you were trying to use up you chakra to use Kuchiyose no jutsu?"

She nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"You used your Chakra Spade and Chakra Shield..." he explained. "What do those attacks have in
common with the Rasengan?"

"Rasengan...?"

"That's what it's called, remember?"

Recalling his use of the strange orb of chakra the Sannin had drawn forth, Naruto tried to determine what it could possibly share in common with her own original attacks. "Well, they're all chakra-types." she answered. "They don't call under any of the other categories as far as I know..."

Jiraiya grinned lightly. "That's a good guess, but not quite true." Naruto's face registered confusion. "Rasengan isn't a mere chakra-based technique. It's meant to be element-based, but isn't complete."

This certainly caught her by surprise. "It's not?"

"No, Yondaime-sama never got the chance to complete it..." Jiraiya's expression took on a faraway look before he quickly came back to himself. "But anyway, back on track... I want you to think about these 3 jutsu. Once you figure out what they have in common, you'll be ready for the next step" He turned away, walking back towards town once more. "See ya later, kid."

"You're leavin' already?"

"Yup," he answered. "I'll be out 'til late tonight, too." A lecherous grin spread across his face. "Don't wait up."

Naruto made a face of disgust, turning away. 'Pervert...' She turned her attention back to the spiral on her hand, then to the rubber ball the Sannin had given her. He had said it would be necessary for the next step of her training. Much like she had with the water balloon, her task was to pop the ball with the use of her chakra. So far it was appearing to be easier said than done. His words replayed over and over in her mind. 'My jutsu share something in common with the Rasengan...?' She visualized the face of the Yondaime on the Hokage monument, trying to imagine what it must have been like to witness his use of the Rasengan. 'He must have really been strong... But I will be, too! 'Cuz that's my nindo!'"

Deciding to get back to the task at hand, she sat down in the grass, contemplating the riddle she had been given. 'Okay... Ero-sennin said Rasengan's supposed to be an Elemental jutsu... though he didn't say what kind... Does it depend on the affinity of the person using it? Or is it unfinished because he never got the chance to decide on what element to use?' She frowned slightly, remembering once again why he'd never gotten that chance. 'Anyway... even if it is unfinished... I'd guess that it would be a Fuuton or a Suiton... The Chakra Spade involves rock even though it isn't a Doton. But... what about the Chakra Shield?' She remembered her fight with Neji and the explosive results that had come from its collision with the Hyuuga's Kaiten. 'That was a pretty big blast,' she mused. 'Does that make it a Katon?'

At the mention of the fire-type jutsu, Sasuke and his signature Gokakyu no Jutsu came to mind. She blinked in surprise. 'Where the hell did that come from...?!' She pulled at her hair in frustration. "Aarrrgghh! This is crazy! I need to focus!" She paused, inspiration striking her like a bolt of lightning. "Focus..." She remembered how she'd made use of the Chakra Spade against Haku and then Kiba. "The Chakra Spade forced chakra into the ground, and the Chakra Shield required focusing chakra over one area." Her eyes widened in comprehension. "Then the Rasengan probably uses both!"
Hopping to her feet, Naruto concentrated her chakra into the ball in her hand, watching as it stretched and contorted under the strain. After a few seconds she released her concentration, a little dismayed when the ball returned to its normal shape. "Well," she sighed ruefully. "I guess it was too much to ask that I get it right on the first try..." Refusing to give up, she took a deep breath before deciding to give it another try. "But I'll keep trying 'til I get it right, cuz I'm a genius of Hardwork!" She gazed skyward, a wide grin spreading across her face. "Right, Lee?"

ooo

Elsewhere amongst the company of his teammates, Rock Lee let out a loud sneeze.

Tenten glanced over him, worry touching her features as she gazed over at her injured teammate. "You all right, Lee?" she asked gently.

The taijutsu master smiled at her. "Oh yes, Tenten-chan, it was just a sneeze."

"Just a sneeze?" Gai repeated anxiously. "Are you certain, young Lee? We must be certain; we cannot allow you to catch a cold!"

The boy gazed up at their sensei, saluting smartly. "Yes, sir, Gai-sensei! Eh--?" He started at the touch of a slim hand against his forehead, blinking in surprise at his lone, female teammate. "Tenten-chan?"

Moving her hand away, the Weapon's Mistress fixed him with a relieved smile. "Well, you don't have a fever," she said by way of explanation. A smile spread across her face. "Someone must have been talking about you."

"Really?" he exclaimed, his expression turning hopeful. "Perhaps Sakura-san?"

"Uhh... maybe...?"

He clenched his hand, allowing an excited grin to spread across his face. "Yes! I must keep up hope!" he exclaimed. "Somehow I will win fair Sakura-san's heart!"

"Yes," Gai said with a knowing grin. "But what about Naru-san?"

Neji, who had been silent throughout the entire exchange, glanced up from the book he had been reading, his expression curious. "What about Naruto?" His teammates fell silent, glancing over at him in surprise. He frowned, feeling strangely self-conscious. "What...?"

~ End Chapter 24
Chapter 25 - The Rasengan

Chapter Summary

Naru takes the next step in learning the Yondaime's incomplete jutsu and hits some bumps along the way.

“DAMN IT!”

Several birds resting in the tree started and fluttered away at the loud expletive, but the blonde from whom it had come paid them no mind. She dropped down to her knees, focusing frustrated blue eyes on the round rubber balloon that she was quickly coming to despise far more than its water-filled, latex predecessor.

Five days had gone by since her revelation regarding the similarities between the Yondaime Hokage’s Rasengan and her own original jutsu, and while she had been aware it would take time to apply that knowledge to the next step of her training, her progress – or lack thereof – was very upsetting.

‘Force and focus… that is the key isn’t it?’ she wondered for what seemed the millionth time. She had tried so many varying ways of applying chakra to the hard little sphere – one hands, two hands, no hands, upside down, sideways, short bursts, long bursts… everything! – and yet there had never been any change. For the briefest of moments she had once again suspected the old ninja of trickery, but after going back to town to purchase a new set of balls and *still* receiving the same results, Naruto knew for certain that her training had hit a brick wall.

“Damn it…” she muttered once again, staring skyward. While she was in no way ready to give up, the blonde was certainly beginning to get frustrated. Just what was it that she was doing wrong? Recalling how Jiraiya had demonstrated the jutsu to her, Naruto parroted his movements, holding the ball out in front of her. Reaching down inside of herself, she drew on her reserves in attempts to channel chakra into the ball. Like every time before, the ball shifted and contorted as her chakra struggled to break free but never quite succeeded. Growling in frustration, she covered the ball with her other hand, forcing as much chakra down into as possible.

So focused on her task was she that she was totally unprepared for the white hot flash of pain that raced through her fingers and up her arms. Dropping to her knees, she bit down on her bottom lip to stifle the startled scream of pain that threatened to rip from her throat.

‘What the he---’ The thought died a sudden death as Naruto experimentally wiggled her fingers only to experience another several thousand stabs of pain. The rubber ball dropped to the ground, forgotten. Even thinking about moving hurt! ‘What the hell did I do…?!’

Pale, sweating, and breathing heavily, Naruto recalled the lecture she had received from Sakura back in Nami no Kuni regarding chakra exhaustion. She hadn’t really been listening, of course, but hindsight was 20/20, wasn’t it? She let out a shaky laugh, only wincing slightly now at the pain the action caused. ‘I guess that means too much force is a no-no…’ She paused, the rubber ball falling back into her line of sight. She frowned determinedly. “Still… if at first you don’t
succeed…” Reaching out and grasping it with a small grimace, the kunoichi rose to her feet once
more. “Keep going ‘til you get it right!”

There was a short pause.

“Wait… I don’t think that’s how it goes…."

ooo

Shizune considered herself a patient woman. Her field did require a person to possess almost
infinite amounts of patience, in fact. After all, one wrong move or rushed decision could have
detrimental results on the welfare of a patient. It could very well kill a person!

However, that being said, Shizune was not in a hospital. She was not even treating a patient. She
was in fact, sitting in the small room within the hotel at which they were staying, ‘patiently’
awaiting the return of her mistress.

That’s right - patiently, calmly waiting.

The next few minutes went by in silence, punctuated only by the soft ticking of the clock on the
wall by the door. Shizune and Tonton, her mistress’ little pet pig, continued to wait in
silence. After all, any minute now, their mistress would be walking through that door…

“Aauughh! Who am I kidding?!” Shizune jumped to her feet, pulling at her short, dark hair in
frustration. “I shouldn’t have let her go alone! Who knows how much money she’s gone through
by now!”

Tonton let out a small ‘oink’ in response.

“Well, patience be damned,” the young woman strode purposefully towards the door, hiking up the
sleeves of her kimono. “I’m going in after he—"

The door to their room slowly opened and in stepped a tall, rather buxom blonde with dark amber
colored eyes. She blinked at the young woman curiously. “Shizune? You’re still up?”

The younger woman blinked back at her. “Tsunade-sama…” Stepping to the side to allow the other
woman entry, she accepted her lady’s suitcase frowning at its lightness. “How much did you
lose?”

The older woman twitched, her cheeks darkening slightly before she quickly regained her
composure. “It doesn’t matter,” she exclaimed airily, waving her hand dismissively. “I’m tired of
this place. It’s time for us to move on.”

Shizune grimaced slightly, knowing that was her mistress’s way of saying, ‘let’s head out before
somebody shows up to try and collect their winnings’. ‘Honestly…” “Well, the next nearest town
is Tanzaku,” she replied. “I hear that it’s very nice.”

“Tanzaku, eh?” Amber eyes turned her way, sparkling with mischief. “Got any casinos?”

“Well… it is rather large… I suppose it c—"

“Sold! We leave first thing tomorrow!”
Shizune exchanged glances with Tonton, the two of them letting out heavy sighs.

ooo

While he had known locating the elusive medical genius would be no easy task, Jiraiya was starting to wonder whether the woman had simply vanished off of the face of the planet. He had assured his young companion that the likelihood of their quarry having left the country was small, but none of his contacts seemed to have any useful information.

She’d gotten better at covering her tracks.

“Jeez, Tsunade, where the hell have you disappeared to?” he muttered under his breath. Exiting the teahouse where he’d been gathering information – both informative and recreational – he decided it best to call it a night. After all, in a few more hours it would be morning!

A grin spread across his face as he recalled his conversation with his ‘apprentice’ a few days before. He’d come in after doing some digging at the local brothel only to find the small blonde waiting up for him. Ooh boy, the earful she’d served him with had been worse than any of the ones Minato had conjured up!

‘Sheesh, whoever said ‘Blondes have more fun’ never met those two... So uptight!’ Granted, that did make them all the more fun to tease, so he supposed in the end it all worked out. After all, at least he knew now that all he had to do to get the blonde off track was mention something about either of Gai’s students – he never realized a girl could get so flustered so quickly.

‘Ahh, to be young and bashful...’ Reaching their room, the white-haired Sannin immediately sought out the young girl in the dark space. After a few seconds his efforts were rewarded as he spotted a small bit of blonde hair underneath the blanket of her futon. “Hey, kid, you awake?” When he received no response, he crept over quietly to pull back the blanket. He didn’t like what he saw.

Her face was pale and sweaty, her hair sticking to her skin in damp clumps. Oblivious to his scrutiny, Naruto shifted slightly in her sleep, grimacing in pain as her hands at her sides twitching spasmodically.

‘Chakra exertion...’ Jiraiya frowned worriedly, shifting his gaze between the blonde’s pained expression her trembling hands. ‘She’s really pushing herself to learn this jutsu...’

His memories conjured up an image of the blonde genin that had bristled at the mere mention of any sort of recreational activity.

~ “How am I s’posed to loosen up when my teammate and sensei were nearly killed by some weirdo out to get me?!” ~

Although he supposed he couldn’t blame her; it was hard to be lighthearted when you were concerned about those important to you. With a soft sigh, the Sannin padded quietly out of the room, coming back minutes later with two packs of ice. Taking great care, he used the bandages the blonde usually wore to gently secure the packs against her hands. The trembling didn’t stop, but it did lessen somewhat.

Naruto let out a small whimper, but didn’t wake.
Jiraiya watched her silently, pushing a few messy bangs out of her face with a heavy sigh. Somehow he should have known that she would overdo it. After all, wouldn’t he have done the same in her place?

‘Heh… Hell, I know I would have,’ he thought ruefully, rolling his eyes. Who knew looking after one genin could be so much trouble? Taking in her pained expression, his amused expression slowly melted away, replaced by weariness once more. “Sorry, kiddo,” he murmured, knowing she was too far under to hear him. His gaze fell on her hand, spotting the little spiral drawing she’d probably redrawn several times over in attempts to succeed in the second step. She’d progressed so far so quickly; if she kept it up… “Just hold out a little bit longer…” he whispered, rising to his feet once more. “You can do it. I know you can.”

ooo

The halls of Orochimaru’s hidden lair were dark and dank and though the snake ninja seemed to prefer such conditions, Kabuto personally found them to be a bit of an annoyance. Really, even though they were hidden deep underground, did the décor really have to scream ‘Evil Lair’? After all, how was he supposed to do his work when he could barely see a foot in front of his face?

He continued down the hall, pausing when the silence was shattered by a wailing scream. The gray haired youth stood still and waited until the scream faded and was followed after by a loud thud; a body hitting the floor, no doubt. Unperturbed by the event, he allowed a grim smirk to settle on his face. “After all,” he murmured quietly to no one in particular. “What the master wants, the master gets…”

Continuing down the hall until he came upon two large, ornate doors, the young man paused a brief moment before pushing one of the doors inward. Peering inside the even darker chambers, his keen eyes immediately spotted the figure of Orochimaru himself – fully dressed – standing over the body of one of his subordinates. The grimace of pain and discomfort was evident on his face, even in the dim candlelight.

Kabuto waited in silence until the older ninja turned his attention to him, his expression clearly displaying his irritation at the current situation facing him. “Have you found her?” he hissed. “Yes,”

Orochimaru’s expression did not change, but had Kabuto been any more crazy than he actually was, he would have sworn there was a brief flash of relief in his yellow eyes that was quickly smothered over by irritation once more. The older ninja stepped over the body, striding towards the double doors in purposeful steps. “Let us leave,” he snapped over his shoulder before vanishing out of the room.

The younger ninja nodded dutifully before following after him. Sparing the corpse a casual glance over his shoulder – he hoped someone came by to dispose of it soon – Kabuto grinned in grim amusement. ‘Oh well,’ he sighed inwardly. As he stepped out into the hall once more, he passed a small card that hung against the door handle, reading in plain, large kanji, “Do Not Disturb”. ‘I guess he should have read the sign…’

ooo

The following morning found Naruto at the same little clearing she had designated her training spot
for the duration of their time spent in Otafuku. She held out the rubber ball in her hand, placing it directly over the spiral she’d once again redrawn on her palm.

“Okay,” she murmured aloud, her blue eyes bright with determination once more. “I know this jutsu requires force *and* focus to work… but I still haven’t managed to pop it yet…” Her eyes narrowed slightly as she recalled the ease with which Jiraiya had managed, as well the painful failure she had experienced the day before.

~ “Though I should warn you…” ~ Jiraiya had cautioned her. ~ “It took the Yondaime 3 years to master…” ~

She paused, shaking her head. “Don’t think about that!” she chastised herself. “Yondaime may have been a genius and Ero-Sennin a Sannin, but it only took me a few days to create my Chakra Shield. Hell, the Chakra Spade took way less than that!” She tightened her grip on the ball, ignoring the few slight twinges of pain she still felt as a result of the previous day’s blunder. “You’re gonna get this jutsu down, Uzumaki Naru,” she vowed. “Even if it takes all the chakra you’ve got!”

Blue eyes widened as the blonde was struck with inspiration once again. She lifted her hand, gazing at the small dot within the spiral on her palm. She remembered the spiral-like grooves left in the tree branch from Jiraiya’s demonstration. ‘Force and focus… is that it…?’ While it was true that both the Chakra Spade and Shield were relatively simple jutsu that had been created on the fly, could the mechanics of the Rasengan really have been that simple?

~ “Y’know, you would think so. You’re a lot like him.” ~

She laughed out loud. “It is! It really is!” Holding up the ball once more, Naruto took a deep breath before drawing upon her reserves once more. “If I force all the chakra I can into one, single point…” An aura of blue chakra rose up around her and she closed her eyes, concentrating. ‘C’mon, Naru… you can do this…’ For the briefest of moments she could feel her control slipping, but refusing to be deterred she used her other hand to compress more chakra into place. The ball began to warp and shift, but continued to hold its ground. ‘C’mon, stupid ball!’ She opened her eyes to glare at the ball, oblivious to the beads of sweat rolling down her face, and the damp locks sticking to the side of her face. The only thing that mattered was that ball. It. Had. To. Go.

The ball continued to warp and buckle, the rubber blistering hot in her hands but the blonde refused to give up. With a colossal effort she pushed down all the chakra she could, letting out a scream of frustration. The rubber shifted and spread out between the spaces in fingers before it finally exploded outwards with a loud bang. No longer confined within a small space, Naruto’s chakra rushed out, its force knocking the small genin backwards across the clearing.

Jiraiya dropped down out of the trees, catching the blonde before she slammed backwards into the tree behind him. The force of her collision jarred him only slightly, and once he was steadied his feet, he lowered her to the ground with an amused smirk.

Blue eyes blinked up at him in confusion. “Ero-sennin…?”

“Congrats, kiddo,” he replied, carefully plucking a few of the ball’s remains out of her hair. “You completed the second step.”

The blonde was silent a few moments before she allowed a weary grin to spread across her face. “I
told you… I’d have this jutsu down before you knew it…”

He smirked back at her. “Don’t get cocky, brat,” he said. “There’s still one more step to learn.”

“I know…and I’ll start first thing tomorrow…”

Tomorrow? The Sannin blinked in confusion, until he noticed the fatigue that had settled over the little blonde in his arms. Holding back a grin, he feigned ignorance. “Oh? So what’re you planning to do now?”

“No?” Blue eyes blinked slowly before finally drifting shut. “Now I’m going to take a nap.” That said, her head lolled to the side, signal the blonde’s descent into unconsciousness.

Though he had been expecting such a reaction, the suddenness of it surprised him nonetheless. Sighing and then chuckling, Jiraiya gave the blonde a quick once-over in search of any injuries. “Hm?” He paused, taking in the sight of the bandages covering her hands. Though her hands were undamaged, the plain white wrappings were now dark and charred in some places, and completely non-existent in others. The Sannin let out a short whistle. “Well, whaddya know… the chakra was so dense it nearly burned straight through…” He paused, gazing up at the blonde once more. “You really are somethin’ else, you know that, kid?”

As she was still unconscious, the blonde did not respond. He chuckled anyway, cradling her in his arms as he rose to his feet once more. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I think it’s ‘bout time we move on.” A thought struck him, and an amused smirk made its way to his face once more. “After all, if Step 2 is anything to go by, we’re gonna need more open spaces for you to train in for Step 3.”

His mind began conjuring up all the potential collateral that could be caused by the little blonde once she began this next undertaking and a wide grin slowly spread across his face.

Oblivious, the blonde slept on.

ooo

Though he had come to the decision the night before to move on in search of information, Jiraiya knew it wouldn’t do anyone any good to head onto the road without securing a proper nutritional breakfast. And considering how hard his apprentice had driven herself into the ground with the previous days training, it certainly wouldn’t hurt for her to take it a bit easier for a day or two. So, they had left Otafuku early that morning, stopping in a small little outskirt village a few miles just outside of a town. After resting up for another day, they would continue on to the next large town - Tanzaku.

“Ero-Senninnn…”

The Gama-sannin twitched slightly but otherwise ignored the whining drawl, keeping his attention focused on the early morning bustling street ahead of him. After all, how many times had he told the brat that his name was JIRAIYA, not Perverted Sage…? Perhaps if she referred to him as ‘Super Perveted Sage’…

“Ero-sennin…” He felt a small finger poking at his arm this time, but he ignored that as well.

Kids these days really had no respect for their elders at all! Trying to make a mockery of him for
his vices... er.. recreational hobbies. Granted, his genin team had been bad about that as well, but
at least they’d referred to him by his proper title! ‘But this kid... I take her out of the village, offer
to train her, even show her a good time at a festival and what do I get...? Jeez, I get no respect at
all...’

‘Oi! Ero-sennin!’ This time the little brat yanked at a lock of his hair, earning a rather unmanly
yelp and a surly glare. She didn’t seem phased – although he’d caught a brief flash of amusement
in her eyes at the yelp.

‘Little punk...’ ‘Didn’t I tell you to call me Jiraiya-sama?’

‘Where are we going, Ero-sennin?’

He twitched again before allowing a smirk to rise across his lips. ‘Back to your usual annoying
self, eh?’ he asked. This time it was him at the receiving end of a glare. ‘We’re getting
breakfast. It is the most important meal of the day, you know.’

The blonde paused, her eyes lighting up. ‘Are we getting ramen?’

“No.”

Ignoring her pout, Jiraiya turned and began walking once more. ‘I don’t care what you say, brat...Ramen is not, nor will it ever be a breakfast food.” The blonde let out a loud ‘yah-huh’, but he
ignored that, too. “In any case, I wanna make one last go around at finding a lead before we skip
town.”

The blonde dropped the pout from her face, her expression turning solemn at the thought of their
mission. “How do you know this Tsunade-lady hasn’t changed her name and settled down in some
backwater village somewhere?”

Jiraiya snorted at the mere thought before shaking his head. “Tsunade? Never. She sticks to the
more populated cities and towns because they tend to have casinos.”

“She likes to gamble?”

“Does she ever!” The Sannin chuckled, no doubt sifting through old memories in the back of his
mind. “Too bad she isn’t any good at it...” He turned his attention back the young kunoichi,
grinning. “Along with being one of the Legendary Three, Tsunade has also earned the title of the
Legendary Sucker.”

A bland expression settled over the blonde’s face. “How... lame...”

Jiraiya laughed again as he lead them towards a small little diner at the corner nearest them. They
both stepped inside and made their way to the counter. “Go on ahead and order while I ask a few
questions, kid,” he said only to pause at the mischievous grin that settled over her face. “And pay
for your own meal this time... Kami knows you have the money...”

Realizing he had caught onto her habit of leaving the restaurant/stand/diner before him so that he
would get stuck with their tab, she stuck out her tongue before drawing out her precious Gama-
chama once more. “You leave my Gama-chama out of this!”

The Sage merely rolled his eyes.
As they sat down on two of the stools, a middle-aged woman donned in an apron bearing the diner’s name approached them and gave a welcoming bow and a friendly ‘irrasshaimase’. Once she straightened up, her eyes fell on Jiraiya, lighting up in recognition. “Oh, welcome back, sir!”

The white-haired ninja turned to her, a grin spreading across his face as he leaned towards her. “And hello to you, too, miss. We’ve met before?”

Naruto made a great show of rolling her eyes.

The hostess smiled. “That’s right,” she answered. “You came in a few days ago asking about a friend of yours.” She paused, thinking back. “A blonde woman… by the name of Tsunade…?”

A man sitting several stools down from them looked up from his coffee. “You looking for Tsunade…?” he asked.

Jiraiya jerked in his seat, snapping his attention towards him. “You know where she is?” he asked.

The man grinned. “I might have some information on her whereabouts,” he murmured. He glanced up at him, his eyes glinting. “But it’ll cost ya…”

The Sage frowned and then sighed heavily. “How much?”

“15,000.”

“What?!” The three adults turned their attention to the blonde staring at the man incredulously. “You’re making him pay you? Why can’t you just tell him?”

The man snorted. “You kidding, kid?” he exclaimed. “I won a crap load money off that chick but she skipped town before paying up what she owed. I gotta make it back somehow…”

‘Yup… he knows where Tsunade is…’ Jiraiya turned his attention to his apprentice, his expression grim. “C’mon, kid, fork over the frog… I might need your cash to make up the difference.”

The blonde clutched her frog purse to her chest protectively. “No…! Not Gama-chama!”

At the man’s amused snort, Jiraiya rolled his eyes with a groan. “Kid, don’t be difficult…”

Instead of relinquishing her money as he expected her to – and really, he probably should have known better - the blonde hopped down from her stool and clasped her hands together. At first he thought she was going to beg, but when he noticed her drawing upon chakra he realized her intent and quickly averted his eyes.

“HENGE! KAWAII NO JUTSU!”

Though he had no doubt been hardened by a life of drinking, gambling, larceny, and other thug-like activities, the man – who went by the name of Sano – was completely undone by the sparkling, puppy-dog eyes suddenly being directed his way. The sneer that had seemed to be permanently etched across his face suddenly slipped away, replaced by a befuddled grin.

Surrounded by hazy pink clouds complete with shining, glittery sparkles for that extra added effect, Naruto gazed up at him with clasped hands and watery blue eyes. “Oh please…” she
pleaded. “Pleeeeeease… won’t you tell us where to find Tsunade… Puh-leeeseeez?”

Eyes closed and head turned away, Jiraiya let out a groan. ‘Sheesh, kid, can you lay it on any thicker…?’

The hostess let out a girlish squeal, but it was Sano who clasped his hands together delightedly, crying out, “Too cute!”

The Toad Sage nearly fell off of his stool.

“Who can say no to a face like that?” he exclaimed, hopping back and forth on each foot.

“So you’ll tell us?”

Sano nodded dutifully, still blushing like a school girl. “A buddy of mine works at the inn where she stayed… said she was headin’ to Tanzaku…”

Naruto released the jutsu, turning her attention to the Sage who had somehow positioned herself behind her during her ‘interrogation’. “Tanzaku…”

Free from the effects of the blonde’s not quite prank jutsu, Sano continued on as if nothing were amiss. “Like I was sayin’ had I known she was gonna skip out, I would’ve—” He paused, noting that the two stools that had been occupied by the pair were suddenly empty.

The hostess let out a gasp, looking around. “They left?”

Flopping back against the counter, Sano let out a huff of annoyance. “Ninja… always make’em pay in advance…”

ooo

Once they’d learned that their ‘target’ was only a few miles away, Jiraiya immediately scrapped his previously plan and decided they need to get to Tanzaku – and fast. He leapt quickly across the rooftops, glancing back over his shoulder at the blonde dutifully racing behind him. “Kid, go wait for me at the edge of town while I go and grab our crap from the inn.”

“But, Ero-sennin… my training--”

“We can finish it on the road,” he cut in. “We gotta get going before we lose her trail again, got it??”

Naruto looked ready to argue, but once she her the seriousness in his tone, she nodded. “Got it.” With that she veered off to the right, heading to the edge of town to wait for his arrival.

He watched her vanish over a rooftop before pushing on an extra burst of speed. Tsunade was or had been in Tanzaku. They had to get there before her trail got too cold. ‘C’mon, Tsunade…’ he thought to himself. ‘How long do you plan to keep on running…?’

End Chapter 25a
Chapter 25b - You're No Hokage

Chapter Summary

What happens when an stubborn force meets an equally obstinate object?

aka Naruto meets Tsunade.

Chapter 25-b

As a ninja under the Legendary Snake Master's employ, Kabuto learned very quickly that there were times to act and times to make yourself as unnoticeable as humanly possible. He walked silently along at his master's back as it shook harshly with pain and strain; despite being expertly trained in the medical arts, the young ninja knew that it was in his best interest to pretend as if he wasn't there.

Pushing his body forward along the wooded trail by what seemed like mere willpower alone, Orochimaru bit down harshly on his lip to keep his anguish and frustration bottled down within him. However, after a few agonizing steps the attempt proved to be a wasted effort as he opened his mouth and left forth a pain-filled scream of outrage.

Behind him, Kabuto came to a stop, remaining quiet even as a tree that had been standing in their path fell to the ground with a loud, resounding thud.

Breathing heavily, Orochimaru bit back a curse, stepping over the felled oak as if nothing were amiss. After all, what did one useless tree matter to him? Arms that had once executed brilliantly complex jutsu were now dark and discolored, hanging uselessly at his sides. Though he could barely move them, the slightest jostle sent waves of pain rushing through his body that left him shaking, sweating, and nauseated.

‘Curse you, Sarutobi…’ he hissed to himself. ‘Curse you to the farthest pits…’ His eyes narrowed as he remembered his sensei’s last moments, his mocking parting words. ‘If only I could bring you back just to *kill* you once more for what you’ve done to me…!’ He stopped, throwing a sharp glance to his companion. The young man stopped, regarding him with a carefully blank expression. It was perhaps one of the few reasons he was still alive. “How far…?”

Adjusting his glasses briefly, Kabuto scanned the terrain. “Just over that ridge,” he answered.

Nodding curtly, the older ninja turned his back once more and continued on his way.

Kabuto followed dutifully after him, expertly trained eyes studying his master’s form as he walked away. It didn’t look good at all. His dark eyes narrowed. ‘I hope this Tsunade is as good as he says she is…’ he thought to himself, taking Orochimaru’s feverish form. How was he even able to keep moving…? ‘Because I doubt he’ll be able to hold out for much longer…’

He didn’t mention any of this aloud, of course. After all, he liked being alive.
Tanzaku had been a bit further away than he’d originally expected, but given that they’d made a mad dash all the way there without stopping, Jiraiya was confident that they’d made pretty good time.

‘Now all that’s left to do is find out where Tsunade is,’ he thought to himself, wiping his brow with a satisfied smirk. Standing on a hill overlooking the town, he noted his wayward teammate had picked quite the location. It was much bigger than Otafuku; he could already spot quite a few taverns—and was that a Pachinko parlor? He chuckled under his breath. ‘The old broad hasn’t changed a bit…’

He studied the sight for a few moments longer, mentally cataloguing a few of the sites he wanted to hit for info, when he became acutely aware of the eyes attempting to bore a hole into his back. A smirk crossed his face as he turned to meet the blue eyed kunoichi’s glare. “Somethin’ the matter?” he asked casually.

Naruto’s glare deepened further. “You forget something, old man?”

He paused, pretending to be deep in thought. “No… I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure I grabbed everything from the inn.”

“I meant my training!” she exclaimed in exasperation. “I still hafta learn the third step!”

“Ahh, so *now* you’re ready, huh?” He smirked, reaching into one of the pockets of his vest to produce another package of balloons. He pulled out two, holding them up for her inspection.

Her face falling at the sight of the much hated latex contraption, Naruto let out a loud groan. “Balloons *again*?”

“No, quite,” he answered. “This step is a lot different… and a lot harder.” To illustrate his point, he blew up one of the balloons and placed it in his upturned palm. “Watch.”

Several moments passed in silence before the blonde turned her attention back to him, her expression one of confusion. “Watch what…?”

The Toad smirked again. “You can’t tell…? All right then, here.” He held up his other hand, drawing chakra to form a Rasengan.

Naruto blinked, gazing back in forth between his two hands. Suddenly it clicked. “You mean…?”

“Oh huh…”

“Inside the balloon…” She stared at the balloon in awe. “Is the same thing…?”

He nodded. “Step three is a combination of steps 1 and 2.”

“Force and focus…” she recited. Her expression turned to confusion once more. “But you’re not popping the balloon.”

“You’re not supposed to,” he answered. “Watch this.” He stepped away from her, heading
towards a tree a few meters away. “At step 2, focusing chakra into a single point you get this--” He paused, ramming the blue orb into the tree trunk, leaving behind a deep grooved mark in the shape of a spiral.

‘Rasengan… Spiral…’ Naruto surveyed the damage, eyes wide in awe.

“Now step three…” Jiraiya formed another Rasengan in his hand, slamming it into the tree much like its predecessor. However, this time the damage was far more intense. Instead of a spiraled groove, there lay a deep spherical hole. Naruto let out a gasp of surprise.

“The key is to force as much chakra as possible – all the while focusing it into a single point,” the Sannin explained. “The more tensely it’s coiled, the more damage it can do.” He paused, handing her a balloon. “But you have to keep it maintained.”

Naruto nodded as she blew up the balloon, reiterating his words in her head. Once she finished she held the balloon much like she had seen him do and began drawing her chakra together. Unfortunately, the balloon began shifting and warping much like it had during the first two steps, and seconds later it burst sending the blonde’s chakra rushing outwards. Naruto jumped, letting out a yelp of surprise.

Jiraiya sighed. “What did I tell you? You have to focus.”

“I am!” she exclaimed, shooting him an annoyed frowned. “This is hard!”

“No kidding.” He tossed her the package of balloons, turning his attention back towards town. “Now, let’s get a move on. I don’t want Tsunade to skip town on us again.”

“Right…” Shouldering her pack once more, Naruto followed after him, reaching into her package to blow up another balloon.

A few minutes passed in silence only to be interrupted by a loud pop and a girlish squeal.

“Ero-sennin screams like a girrrlll!”

“Shut up, brat, I do not!”

ooo

Shizune stood dutifully behind her mistress, hands clasped together in tense worry. The older woman was focused completely on her task, amber eyes serious as if the whole world depended on her next move. The dark haired woman waited with bated breath, watching as a strong, slim hand reached forward, grasping the device’s handle.

Tsunade paused a few moments, as if steadying herself, before giving the handle a harsh tug. The slot machine in front of her instantly came to life, little lights flashing. Soon its inner gears began clunking and whirring as the bars on the outside spun round and round madly, preparing to spell all their fates.

Shizune stared at the three little innocuous seeming bars, beads of sweat running down her brow, biting her lip in apprehension. ‘Oh please…’ she thought to herself. ‘Oh please, oh please, oh please…’
Both women stood in silence, watching as the first bar slowed to a stop, followed not long after by the second, and finally the third. Seven… seven… and seven… Tsunade let out a loud gasp as machine came to life once more, this time flashing bright lights and blaring triumphant music as bright golden tokens tumbled out of a slot at the bottom and into her winnings bucket below.

‘I won…?’

Shizune let out an elated squeal of surprise. “Tsunade-sama!” she exclaimed, eyes widening at the sight of the tokens that still continued to spill forth. “You did it! You won!”

The older woman leaned back in her chair, a stunned expression still etched on her face. “I know…” She gazed at the numerous tokens accumulating in her bucket, a frown slowly making its way to her face. ‘But I never win… certainly not like this…’ Her frown deepened and she bit her lip as a feeling of anxiousness slowly overtook her. This did not bode well. Not at all. ‘Why do I get a bad feeling about this…?’

“Tsunade-sama?” Shizune frowned worriedly as her mistress rose out of her seat, her expression nowhere near the elation she herself had felt just seconds ago.

The older woman turned to her, expression neutral. “C’mon,” she murmured. “Let’s go.”

“R-right…” Pausing briefly to collect her earnings – she’d never expected Tsunade of all people would win such a jackpot! – she followed her out. “Is something the matter, Tsunade-sama?” she asked finally. “You seem so tense.”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.” She paused, pushing her bangs out of her face with a casual brush of her hand. “I just needed a change of scenery, that’s all.”

Her assistant’s expression brightened instantly as she drew out a traveler’s guide she had purchased at the inn. She scanned through a few pages quickly, a smile spreading across her face. “There are a lot of interesting things to see here,” she explained. “Ooh—there’s Tanzaku castle! It says here that it’s got a great view of the city – we should go check it out!”

Seeing the excited expression on the younger woman’s face, Tsunade relented with a sigh. “Fine then,” she replied. “Let’s go.”

Shizune let out a delighted laugh and lead the way down the street. A few minutes of walking lead them directly to the center of town where Tanzaku castle stood – a tall tower surrounded by a few stone sentry walls that looked far older than any of the other more modern buildings surrounding it.

“Wow,” Shizune exclaimed, staring up at the large structure with an expression of awe. “Isn’t it amazing?”

Their little pig, Tonton, let out a squeal of agreement.

Tsunade let out an absent affirming grunt, an expression of extreme boredom on her face as she busied herself leafing through Shizune’s travel guide. There just had to be some more decent casinos in the area. Just as she was about to comment that they head inside – the sooner they were done, the sooner she could get back to having some real fun – her keen senses picked up on a large surge of chakra not far from where they stood. Her eyes narrowed at the familiarity of it. “It can’t be…”
Shizune caught notice of it soon after her mistress, her body tensing as she went on the alert. “Tsunade-sama…?”

Before the blonde could comment, the ground beneath them shook violently. They all watched in horror as the old castle collapsed in on itself, only to explode outwards in a shower of rock and dust as a large snake emerged out of the rubble, hissing loudly.

Innocent bystanders in the vicinity screamed, instantly fleeing for their lives, while the two women stood their ground. Tsunade gazed up at the large reptile, her eyes narrowing as they honed in upon the two figures standing atop its head.

Tsunade bit back a curse, recognizing the slitted yellow eyes glinting deviously at her instantly. “You…”

Orochimaru stepped jumped down from his perch, meeting her scowling face with a smirk. Kabuto landed beside him, releasing the Summons with a quick hand sign and a quiet ‘Kai’. “It’s been a long a long time,” he murmured softly. “Hasn’t it, Tsunade?”

Gazing at the dark haired figure before her, Shizune tensed in surprise and horror. ‘Him?! Here…?! But why…?’

“Orochimaru…” Tsunade drew the name out slowly, as if the mere utterance left a bitter foul in her mouth. “You didn’t come all this way to see me, did you?”

“What…?” The other Sannin paused, looking affronted. “I can’t stop in and visit an old teammate?” He frowned, his expression one of hurt. “Tsunade, you wound me…”

The Slug Master studied as he spoke, taking in his body’s condition with the keen eyes of a medic. ‘He’s got a hight fever… almost zero mobility in his arms…’ She noted the bandaged finger just barely peeking out of the sleeves of his dark colored kimono. ‘A sealing perhaps…?’ As he fell silent, she gazed back up at his face once more with a sardonic smirk. “Looks like someone already has.”

The dark haired ninja twitched almost imperceptibly as the young man beside him stepped forward to speak. “That’s why we’ve come to see you, Tsunade-sama,” he explained. “If you could just—”

She raised a hand, cutting him off neatly. “I haven’t treated anyone in years.” she replied. “You’ll have to find someone else.”

“There is no one else.” he insisted. “You are the only one with enough skill to assist us.”

Shizune let out a derisive scoff. “Why would Tsunade-sama help you?” She jabbed an accusing finger in the Snake Sannin’s direction. “He’s a traitor to our village! He’d more than likely go after Konoha the minute he was healed!”

Orochimaru chuckled quietly. “Been there, done that.”

Both women tensed again. “What?”

“Didn’t you hear?” He tilted his head, regarding them casually. “Sensei is dead.”
Tsunade’s eyes narrowed. “You killed him.” she accused. Shizune’s sharp gasp was ignored.

Yellow eyes registered amusement as the other Sannin met her gaze with a smirk. “Well, I’m not one to brag…”

“How… how dare you!” Shizune crouched slightly, rushing forward with a yell of anger.

Kabuto tensed, waiting for her attack. He watched the dark haired woman zig-zag back and forth and she narrowed the distance between them, rapidly firing a volley of senbon at them from a small holster hidden within the sleeve of her yukata. Though he blocked each of them with his kunai, he was surprised at the skill the slight woman was displaying.

‘She’s better than I thought she was,’ he thought to himself. ‘Fast too…’

Shizune was almost on top of him now, drawing out a kunai from somewhere within the folds of her clothing. She raised her blade, preparing to strike the younger ninja if he didn’t stand down. It may have been her duty to preserve life, but… “Get out of my way!”

“Shizune! Stop it!”

The younger woman halted in her tracks, her gaze shooting back to her mistress in confusion. “Tsunade-sama?” When the older woman made no reply, she slowly drew back her blade from Kabuto’s neck, only a little disconcerted when he did the same – when had he managed that? – leaping back quickly to resume her place at her side.

Tsunade kept her gaze on her old teammate, only her eyes revealing her displeasure at the situation. While she had expected bad things to follow her unexpected win, this had certainly not been one of them! “I don’t care what your plans are,” she told him shortly. The other man remained unfazed. “I won’t help you.”

“So cold, Tsunade? My… the years have changed you.”

Her mask did not falter. “So they have.”

“I hadn’t realized…although it comes to no surprise…” He paused, smirking once more. “You did take their deaths very hard…”

This time, Tsunade did tense, her gaze going to the ground.

Her assistant glanced over at her, her face gray in worry. ‘Tsunade-sama…’

“How does it feel, I wonder,” Orochimaru went on. “To know that you sent two loved ones off to their horrific and agonizing deaths…?”

“Shut your mouth!” Shizune barked. The Snake Ninja's smirk only deepened.

A few moments passed in silence before Tsunade looked up once more, her amber eyes as hard as the stone they took after. “I suggest you leave,” she murmured in a low tone. “Now. You have until I count to five.”

Kabuto tensed. Was she serious? “But…”
“One…”
“Tsunade-sama, wait!”
“Two…”
“If you would just listen…”
“Three…”
“We don’t expect you to help us for free—”
“Four…”

The young bespectacled ninja was starting to get worried now. What could he possibly say to convince her? “We can make a deal!”

“FIVE!” The section of stone wall behind Tsunade crumbled away under the onslaught of her fist, leaving nothing but rubble. She glared at them, her eyes blazing in fury. “Get the HELL out of here!”

“But, Tsunade-sama…!”

The blonde charged forward, pulling her fist back to deliver a blow that would no doubt leave them in the same condition as the wall.

This time it was Orochimaru that spoke. “I can bring Dan and Nawaki back for you.”

Tsunade froze, her punch screeching to a halt in mid-air. All the anger rushed out of her as she stared at him in confusion and surprise. “What…”?

The dark haired Sannin smirked. “I know of a kinjutsu that enables souls to be brought back from the dead,” he explained calmly. “Heal my arms and I will bring Dan and Nawaki back to life.”

“Impossible…” Shizune breathed.

“Oh, it’s very possible…” Orochimaru kept his gaze on Tsunade. The blonde haired woman had gone very still. “Think about it. To be able to have your fiancée and beloved little brother back in your arms again…”

Suspecting a trap, Shizune turned to her mistress, her eyes pleading. “Don’t listen to him, Tsunade-sama!” she pleaded. When the older kunoichi didn’t reply, the young woman sighed heavily, frowning in sympathy. “I know it hurts, but you can’t agree to his offer! Nawaki-sama and Dan-ojisan died defending Konoha – they would never agree to something like thi—”

“Shut up, Shizune!”

The young woman froze in alarm, the pain masked beneath the older woman’s angry tone painfully clear. ‘Tsu-Tsunade-sama…’

Orochimaru watched their exchange with an almost amused expression. Perhaps she hadn’t changed that much after all. She always had been quick to anger. ‘So easy to manipulate…’ With
extreme effort, he slowly lifted his arm and drew a finger to his lips. After biting down on the digit hard enough to draw blood, he held it up for her to see.

As he expected, the blonde froze, her eyes widening in terror. Within moments she reached up to clutch desperately at the pendant that hung loosely round her neck as her body began trembling harshly.

“Still that same old fear of blood, Tsunade…?” He paused, clucking his tongue in false sympathy. “It reminds you of Dan’s death, I suppose… Such a pity…”

Tsunade didn’t respond, paralyzed in fear at the sight of the single drop of red seeping through his bandages.

Kabuto gazed at the blonde, his eyes wide in fascination as well as disappointment. ‘Hemophobia…’ he marveled. ‘Her…?’

Orochimaru continued on, his expression turning serious. “I can take all that fear and pain away, Tsunade. I can give your loved ones back to you.” He lowered his hand, tucking it away in his sleeve once more. “All I need is my arms back…”

“And two human sacrifices,” Kabuto hastened to add. “But we’ll leave those for you to acquire.”

“Are you serious?” Shizune spat in disgust. “We would never—”

“You needn’t decide now,” Kabuto interrupted, casting another glance at the still trembling blonde. “Take a week to think it over. We’ll be back for your answer then.”

The smirk returned to Orochimaru’s face as he regarded his old teammate. “Until then,” he purred. “Do take care.”

With a few hand signs, he and Kabuto vanished in a poof of smoke.

Tsunade dragged in a deep breath, slowly releasing her death grip on the slim pendant that hung from her neck.

Shizune gazed back her with worried eyes. “Tsuna—”

The blonde raised her hand, effectively cutting her off. “We’re leaving.”

The brunette nodded dutifully. “Yes, m’lady,” As her mistress turned and walked away, Shizune glance back at the spot where Orochimaru had once stood, her gaze darkening in worry. A few moments later she turned and left as well.

Jiraiya scanned the busy, crowded streets, his frustration increasing by the moment. Though they’d been in town only half an hour, he was already beginning to suspect their search would turn out to be much like hunting for a needle in a haystack. “Ugh… We’re not gonna find her this way,” he muttered aloud. “We need to get to higher ground.”

Naruto scowled as she popped yet another balloon, her concentration having been broken by his comment. “How’s that gonna help?” she asked. “She’ll still be another face in the crowd.”
The Toad Sage laughed out loud. “Think again, kid.” Not bothering to give any further explanation, he leapt up the rooftop, frowning when his keen eyes spotted a large number of people running in their direction. He knew a fleeing crowd when he saw it; the terror and panic on their faces was clear to him even from this distance.

Ear perking at the faint sounds of their screams, Naruto turned in his direction, blue eyes darkening in confusion at the sight of the people. "What's going on?"

Determined to find that out for himself, Jiraiya jumped down from his perch, landing in the path of a young man running along with the crowd. The man reared back in surprise, but calmed down somewhat when he recognized him as a ninja. "What's happening?" Jiraiya asked of him. "What are you running from?"

"A snake!" the man yelped. "A giant snake! It appeared out of nowhere!"

"A snake...?" A frown quickly made its way across the old ninja's face as he processed the information. It could only mean one thing... 'So, he's here...' He turned his attention back to the man, his expression stern. "Which way is it?" he asked. "Can you show us?"

The man jumped, backing away as he shook his head. "Show you?! No way - I'm outta here!" Stepping around him, the man bolted, once again vanishing into the crowd.

"Wait, don't go!" Naruto called.

"Let'im go." Jiraiya frowned, resuming his position on the rooftop. "We gotta look into this. Tsunade'll just hafta wait." Turning in the direction from which the crowd had run, he bounded off in search of the snake and its master.

"Right..." Jamming her balloon into her pocket, Naruto dutifully followed after him, a frown making its way across her whiskered face. 'A giant snake... here...?' Her frown deepened as she remembered a similar situation during the Chuunin Exams. A giant snake had attacked her on her way back to her teammates in the Forest of Death and only some quick thinking and several dozen Kage Bunshin had kept her from being devoured alive.

An image of a creepy looking Kusa ninja flashed through her memory and she scowled.

~ "Ah, so you survived my snake... Pity. ~

There had definitely been something unnatural about that woman - the way she spoke, the way she moved... it had almost been inhuman. However, more unsettling than that was the feelings that had overcome her at the sight of her. Though the woman had taunted her skills as a ninja, Naruto had felt an almost all-consuming desire to rend her limb from limb. It was frightening to be sure - why would she want to kill someone she had never met before? Could it have been something to do with the fox?

~ KILL IT... ~ The demon had whispered to her, its normally smooth, silky tone replaced with an almost primal growl. The fox had really wanted this woman dead. The question was why? ~ KILL IT FOR WHAT IT HAS DONE TO US... KILL IT! ~

There had also been another time the Kyuubi had made its desires known. In her fight against Gaara, Naruto had once again retreated into the recesses of her mind, demanding to know what the
Bijuu's intentions were.

~ "Then what DO you want?" ~

The Kyuubi had paused a moment, as if debating whether or not to answer her question. ~TO KILL... ~ She remembered tensing at how much killing intent had gone into the utterance of two simple words. ~ THE ONE WHO CALLS HIMSELF OROCHIMARU... ~

'Orochimaru...' Were these people related somehow? She gazed upwards to ask Jiraiya, noting that the distance between she and the Toad Sage had increased. Letting out a squeak, she put on a burst of chakra in order to catch up. "Hey, Ero-sennin! Wait for me!"

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Jiraiya stared at the large pile of rubble before them, his expression carefully blank. There had been a building here... once. "The castle's gone..." he murmured.

The blonde beside him scanned the area, her expression a mixture of frustration and relief. "So's the snake..." 'And my chance at gettin' some answers...'

The white haired Sannin left out a sigh, scratching the back of his head in resignation. "Well, there's nothing we can do now," he replied. He turned, glancing over at her. "You hungry?"

Her stomach growled loudly in response, earning a blush from her and a laugh from him. "Of course I am!" she said with a sulk. "We spent all day runnin' non-stop!"

"C'mon then, let's go find a place to get some grub." He turned away from her, the frown once again resuming its place on his face once more. Orochimaru had been here in Tanzaku... no doubt for the same reasons as them. Had he and Tsunade made contact somehow? Why? What had happened? 'Tsunade...Orochimaru... just what the hell are you two doing...?'

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"Tsunade-sama..." The call went ignored, and Shizune watched on in worry as her mistress knocked back another cup of sake. Once it was empty, the blonde reached for the pitcher in front of her only to frown when she realized it was empty. "Tsunade-sama, don't you think you've had enough?"

Face flushed with alcohol, the blonde let out an unladylike snort. "Don't be ridiculous!" she exclaimed, waving to a passing waiter. "Waiter! Lemme get another round over here!"

Though her mistress was no stranger to alcohol, Shizune was quickly growing more concerned with the amount she was consuming. 'She only drinks this much when she's worried about something...' The brunette's mind went back to their recent encounter with her mistress's old teammate. 'What is you're thinking about... Tsunade-sama...?'

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"Ah, this looks like a good place."

Naruto glanced upwards, a frown making its way across her face at the sight of the establishment in front of which they stood. As the Toad Sage stepped forward to enter the building, she grabbed
the back of his vest, halting his movements. "Hold it, Ero-sennin!"

"Huh?" he glanced back at her in confusion. "What's wrong now?"

She gave him a look pointing at a sign that clearly indicated the nature of the establishment. "This is a bar." she pointed out blandly.

"So?"

"Hello! I'm underage! I can't go in there! I thought we were going to eat!"

"They serve food here." Naruto gave him a dirty look and the old ninja rolled his eyes. "Don't be such a baby - nobody's gonna serve you any alcohol." Positioning himself behind the blonde, he gave her a good push that sent her stumbling through the doors. "Now c'mon!"

"Hey! Ero-senninnnn!"

"Kid, how many times do I hafta tell you--" The rest of Jiraiya's sentence was drowned out by a loud, drunken call from a patron across the room.

"Heeyyy! Waiter, what does a lady hafta do to get a good drink in here--eh? Jiraiya?"

Both Naruto and Jiraiya looked up at the bleary eyed blonde squinting back at them from across the room. "Jiraiya? Izzat you?"

The white haired Sannin paused a moment before his eyes widened comically in both shock at surprise. "Aaahhh! Tsunade?"

The genin behind him jumped, taking another look at the blonde currently mirroring the older ninja's expression beside her. "THAT'S Tsunade...?" she awed. She stared at the other blonde, hardly able to believe their search had ended in such a way. Was this really the woman they were looking for? 'No wonder he was so worked up... Her boobs are HUGE!!'

Crossing the room in quick strides, Jiraiya sat down at the table across from the blonde woman and the younger brunette beside her. After a quick 'come hither' gesture from him, Naruto followed suit. A few seconds passed in tense silence until a waiter approached their table. He placed down another ochoko in front of Jiraiya, quickly took their orders, and hurried away.

"Well, Tsunade..." Jiraiya said finally. "It sure has been a long time..."

Taking another sip from her sake, Tsunade fixed him with a dry look before replying. "Not long enough if you ask me." She closed her eyes, heaving a sigh. "Been runnin' into all sorts of old faces today..."

"Is that a fact?" he asked casually, partaking a bit of his own sake.

"Yup..." Tsunade opened her eyes, studying him. "But I'm sure you already knew that, didn't you?"

He sighed, setting his cup down on the table carefully. "So, what did Orochimaru have to say?"

Beside the two teammates on opposite ends of the table, Shizune and Naruto tensed at the mention
Several more minutes passed in uneasy silence, broken only by the waiter returning with their orders. Uneasy at the tense atmosphere, Naruto hesitantly dug into her meal - a small order of tempura - while waiting for the older blonde to speak once more.

Tsunade spared her assistant a sharp warning glance before reaching into her pocket for a deck of playing cards. "Not much," she answered casually. Keeping her expression neutral, she shuffled the deck before setting it down on the table before the white haired ninja. "What about you, though? What brings you here?"

"Straight to the point, eh?" He reached down, cutting the deck in two before lifting his gaze back to her face once more. He paused a few moments before speaking again, his expression far more serious than any of the others present could ever recall seeing it. "In its infinite wisdom, the village council has decided to appoint you Godaime Hokage of Konohagakure no Sato."

Tsunade paused in her dealing of their cards, her eyes going wide. Beside her, Shizune let out a sharp gasp of surprise.

His words finally catch up to her brain, Naruto jerked, nearly choking on her food. "What...?! Her?!"

Ignoring their reactions, Jiraiya went on. "You know about the Sandaime, don't you?"

Shizune gazed at him, her insides going cold. 'So it's true, then...' She remembered the dark haired Sannin's words and the self-satisfied smirk that had been present on his face. 'He really did kill him...'

"Yeah, I heard." Tsunade said calmly. "Orochimaru killed him - told me so himself."

Naruto froze, her mind conjuring up an image of the old man. Though he had been forced out of retirement at the death of his successor, Old man Sarutobi had always shown her kindness despite having the knowledge of what was sealed inside of her. The Sandaime, the first victim of her Oiroke no Jutsu, the person who introduced her to Ichiraku ramen, the person who had kept her secret for all of those years, the first person she had ever considered precious... "This Orochimaru..." She surprised herself with how even her tone was. "Who is he...?"

Though he too was surprised at how calmly she was taking the information, Jiraiya was well aware of the trembling of her hands in her lap. He kept his gaze on the cards in his hands as he spoke. "Orochimaru is a part of the Legendary Three... like Tsunade and myself," he answered quietly. "He abandoned the village years ago and became an S-Rank criminal."

"And he killed Hokage-jiji...?!" She didn't understand. When they'd told her of the old man's death, why had they neglected this information? If he was one of the Legendary Three like them, didn't that stand to reason that he had once been their teammate? And if they knew he was responsible for the old man's death, why had he been able to just walk away? She rose out of her seat, staring at him with an expression of anger and confusion. "The Sandaime was your teacher, wasn't he? How could you just let Orochimaru guy go?!!"

Jiraiya didn't respond.

Tsunade stared back and forth between the pair, frowning slightly as she massaged her temple. "Jiraiya..." she muttered, her expression irritated. The little punk was just so loud; didn't the kid know not to talk to elders in such a way? "Who is this brat?!"
Jiraiya spared a quick glance at the blonde beside him who twitched just slightly before answering quietly, "This is Uzumaki Naruto."

The elder blonde jerked in surprise. 'Uzumaki...? Amber eyes studied the youth, zoning in the three whisker-like marks on each cheek. 'This kid's the Jinchuuriki...?'

Annoyed the conversation was drifting away from the topic at hand, Naruto pounded the table with a fist in frustration. "Don't change the subject, you two!" she snapped angrily. "This Orochimaru guy killed the Hokage! Why are we just sitting here instead of going after him?!"

"No!" she snapped back. "I won't sit down! I want to kno--"

Dark eyes pierced hers, halting the rest of her words. "Sit. Down."

Knowing she was fighting a losing battle, Naruto slowly resumed her seat, fixing an angry scowl to her face.

Satisfied the discussion was over, however temporarily, Jiraiya turned his attention back to his old teammate. "Well, Tsunade...?" The blonde merely quirked an eyebrow at him. "What's your answer?"

She frowned, closing her eyes once more. "Hn... not a chance in hell."

Shizune's eyes widened as she stared at her. 'Tsunade-sama... you're not actually considering that awful man's offer instead... are you...?'

Unaware of the brunette's fears, Jiraiya merely smirked. "Sounds familiar..." he mused, leaning back in his seat. "You said the same thing the first and last time I asked you out on a date."

Beside him, Naruto twitched, rolling her eyes in exasperation. 'I knew it!' However, determined to get some answers, she fixed the old ninja with another angry glare. "Just what're you playin' at, old man?" she demanded. He blinked at her and she jabbed a finger in a rather bored-looking Tsunade's direction. "You told me we were searching for her to heal Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei - not to make her Hokage!" She paused, turning her glare on the woman. "And what's the deal with her refusing?"

The white-haired ninja chuckled humorlessly. "She can't refuse..." he replied. "She knows as well as I do that there's no one better suited for the job than she is. Skilled in medical ninjutsu and a powerful force in field combat, Tsunade saved a great many lives on and off the field during the last Ninja war..." He paused, smirking. "Oh, and need I mention that she's the granddaughter of the Shodaime Hokage - the man who founded our village?" A soft chuckle escaped his lips when the subject of his little diatribe let out a scoff. "I guess you could say it's her familial duty." He glanced at the genin beside him, grinning slightly at her thunderstruck expression. "Don't worry... I didn't tell you any of this stuff before because it's a lot for a genin to take in..." 'And you already had enough on your plate to worry about...'

As if she could read his mind, Naruto let out a snort, folding her arms across her chest as she turned her glare elsewhere.
Tsunade studied the blonde across from her, none too impressed with what she saw. A loud little back-talker that didn't hold any respect for older, wiser, and stronger ninja. Leaning on her hand, she regarded her old teammate with a pitying glance. "What'sa matter, Jiraiya?" she taunted. "The pickings in the village must be pretty slim if this was the best genin you could manage to scrape up." She paused, snorting lightly. "I mean, this one's *nothing* like your old one."

"That's certainly no surprise," Jiraiya responded, his expression showing no reaction to the veiled barb. Tsunade pouted slightly in disappointment. "The Yondaime was one in a million... smart, talented, popular..." He flipped his hair over his shoulder gallantly. "And almost as dashing as his Sensei."

Naruto rolled her eyes once more.

Tsunade snorted, "And look where it got him."

Jiraiya paused, feeling the blonde twitch beside him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her expression tighten as a hand subconsciously went to her middle over where the Seal to the Kyuubi lay. A frown made its way to his face as he turned his attention back to Tsunade.

"Really," she continued, oblivious to his displeasure as she poured herself another cup of sake. "Throwing his life away like that... The old man, too... I would've thought he'd know better..."

His frown deepened. She was toeing the line. "Tsuna--"

"You shut your mouth!" All three adults' attention went to the smaller of the two blondes, her eyes blazing in anger as she stared down the older kunoichi. "You don't know anything!"

The Slug Mistress gave her a look before turning her attention back to her drink as if she weren't worth her attention. "I know a lot more than you, kid," she sniffed. "He was my sensei."

"And yet you didn't learn a damn thing!" Naruto spat back. This was the woman they wanted to make Hokage?!

'\textit{The hell they will...!} 'Hokage-jiji fought and died to protect the people of the village--" she snarled. "People he cared for! Like family!"

Amber eyes glanced back at her sharply. "And yet people died anyway, didn't they?" The young genin flinched. Tsunade sighed, shaking her head. "You're too naive, kid. You can't always just jump in and save the day. Hell, why stick your neck out at all?" She knocked back the rest of her drink, shaking her head again in disapproval. "It's not worth it. The only thing I'm willing to risk is my money," She reached for the tokkuri once more to refill her cup. "Anything else is for suckers--"

A smaller hand zipped forward, knocking the container out of her reach and against the wall behind her head where it shattered with a loud crash.

Shizune blinked in surprise; she hadn't even been able to track the movement. Dark eyes stared at the little blonde across the table in awe. '\textit{This kid's quicker than I thought...!}'

Rising from her seat once more, Naruto stomped a foot on the table's surface, fixing the blonde Sannin with a look of outrage. Several nearby patrons started in surprise. "I've have just about all I can stand of your crap!" she growled.
"Naruto..." Jiraiya waved a hand at the girl in attempts to diffuse the situation. "Sit down... You're causing a scene..."

Steel blue eyes met his briefly before turning back to the object of her ire. "No, I will not sit down. Not this time!" She pointed a shaking finger at Tsunade once more. "She doesn't care about anyone but herself - it's disgusting!" How could she have possibly been a student of the old man's? With an attitude like that? She was almost as bad as this Orochimaru person! "You may be one of the Legendary Three," she snarled. "But you're just a boozed up barfly to me! Drown yourself in your sake - there's no way someone like you will EVER be worthy of the title Hokage!"

The tavern fell into silence and Jiraiya winced, replaying her words in his head. 'Yow...' Knowing Tsunade the way he did, he knew there was no way she was gonna let something like this go without having something to say.

A few more moments paused until Tsunade stood to face the younger girl, planting her foot on the table as well. Meeting the smaller blonde's blue eyed gaze, an angry smirk made its way across her alcohol-flushed face. "You've got a lot of mouth for one so little, kid--" The younger blonde growled at the insult and her smirk widened. "Don't you know talk like that'll get your ass kicked?"

"Tsunade-sama..." Shizune stared at the pair in worry, beads of sweat rolling down her face as she hastened to calm down her mistress. After all, she was obviously drunk; there was no telling what she'd do! "Please don't..."

Naruto bristled at the older woman's words, knowing a threat when she heard one. "You think I'm scared of you?" she spat back, refusing to back down. "Anytime, anyplace - you name it and I'll be there to kick *your* ass!"

Tsunade let out a sharp laugh. Was this kid serious? "Oh, this is rich." Stepping down from the table, she jabbed a thumb in the direction of the exit. "Step outside, brat."

"Tsunade-sama!" Shizune turned to Jiraiya, her expression pleading. "Please say something!"

The Toad Sage merely grinned, watching as the two blondes stomped their way outside. "Don't worry, Shizune," he said placatingly. "I'm sure she'll be fine..."

"But against one of the Three--"

Jiraiya's grin merely widened. "I was talking about Tsunade."

Shizune only blinked. "What?" The sage merely laughed and strolled out of the tavern, leaving her to rush out after him. "Ja-Jiraiya-sama!"

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Given the late hour, most of the crowds had already thinned out leaving the streets almost completely empty save for the two blondes currently staring each other down. Jiraiya and Shizune exited the tavern and took their place on the sidelines, anxiously waiting to see who would make the first move.

Tsunade studied the little genin before her, a disbelieving smirk making its way across her
"A Master against a apprentice," she muttered, letting out a heavy sigh. "I should be ashamed of myself."

Naruto merely scowled at her. "You'll be singing a different tune in a minute," she shot back.

The Slug Mistress rolled her eyes. "You're gutsy, I'll give you that." she said with a snort. "Tell you what, since you're so determined to go through with this - I've decided I'm gonna go easy on you." She raised her hand, extending her index finger. "To be fair, I'm only gonna use one finger." At the younger blonde's incredulous expression, Tsunade's grin turned dangerous. "Though I should warn you - it's all I'm gonna need to beat you."

"And I should warn you," Naruto reached a hand into her weapons pouch, drawing out several shuriken. "Don't underestimate me!"

Tsunade dodged the rapidly hurled projectiles easily, smirking as the blonde rushed her head on with a kunai raised. With a quick burst of speed, she closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye, her smirk deepening at the blonde's startled expression.

"...the hell...?" Naruto yelped in surprise at the sight of the smirking older woman suddenly in front of her - she was so fast! - watching as she easily knocked her weapon out of her hand. 'How...?'

There was no time to even finish the thought before Tsunade raised a hand to her forehead knocking her backwards with a mere flick of her finger. More startled than injured, Naruto yelped again as the blow knocked her body several yards back. Flipping over in the air, Naruto drew another kunai from her pouch, dragging it along the ground to slow her movement.

'How the hell did she do that...?' she wondered, staring at the distance that now stood between she and the Sannin. 'All she did was flick me...? How could she have done that with just a finger...?'

Seeing the expressions flashing across her face, Tsunade chuckled. "What's the matter, kid?" she called teasingly. "Scared of me now?"

Blue eyes narrowed. "Of you? Not likely. What're you gonna do, barf on my shoes?" Naruto rose to her feet, brandishing her kunai once more. "You're practically soaked in sake - I'm gettin' sick just at the sight of you!"

In the distance, Jiraiya frowned as he watched the smirk slowly fade from his old teammate's face to be replaced by a furious scowl. 'You're pushin' your luck, kid...' he warned silently.

Tsunade trembled in anger. Just who did this kid think she was? Your average Jounin? She was a freakin' Master - nobody talked to her like that and got away with it! "Why you rotten little punk--"

She took a step forward only to have to side-step a large hunk of rock that had been hurled her way. "Wha...?"

From the sidelines, Shizune blinked in surprise at the bizarre jutsu the little blonde had just displayed. She turned to the Sannin beside her, her expression curious. "What was that...?"

Jiraiya chuckled. "The Uzumaki Chakra Spade..."

The brunette frowned in confusion. That couldn't be right. "But that's no--"

"She made it herself," he supplied, keeping his attention on the fight. Just what would the little twerp try next?
The young genin drew chakra to her hands, slamming her palms to the ground to draw up another hunk of rock. Hefting it over her shoulders, she hurled it towards the other woman with surprising speed.

Expecting the attack this time, Tsunade hit the rock head on, reducing it to tiny bits of rubble. "Well, if that's how you're gonna play it..." Fed up with games, she rushed forward, drawing her hand back into a fist.

Shizune's eyes widened in alarm. "Tsunade-sama, no!"

Naruto's eyes widened as well; if a finger could knock her back several yards, who knew what a whole fist could do? 'Crap! Think fast!' Drawing her hands into a quick seal, Naruto summoned a quick Chakra Shield, raising it up to block the Sannin's punch at the last possible moment.

Tsunade let out a gasp of surprise, snatching her hand away and jumping back as if she'd been bitten. 'A shield made out of chakra...' She gazed down at her hand, the pale flesh looking as if it had sustained a burn. 'Just what is this kid...?' Catching the victorious smirk on the younger blonde's face, she smirked again and drew forth green healing chakra to repair the damage. "Nice try, kid..."

Naruto merely scowled back at her.

Thinking back to her words back in the taven, Tsunade frowned thoughtfully. "Tell me something..." She studied the blonde in front of her, wondering how it was one nobody genin would feel so strongly about the past two Hokage. After all, why would a Jinchuuriki care that about the two ninja that had played a hand in its creation? "What is about the 3rd and 4th that has you so touchy? It's not like they meant anything to you."

The younger blonde was silent for several moments. "You've got a point about the Yondaime," she said finally. "I really don't know a thing about him..." 'Cept that he sealed a pissy old demon in me the second I was born...' "But..." She remembered Sarutobi's smiling face once more. "Hokage-jiji was the first person to ever give a damn about me. He was a good person and I won't stand for anybody talkin' trash about him!" She paused, a dangerous smirk making its way to her face. "Cuz someday I'm gonna be the one to fill his shoes!"

Shizune blinked. "What...?"

Jiraiya remained silent, listening.

"I made a vow to him and myself," the young blonde continued. "That one day I'd become the Greatest Hokage and protect everyone! That is my dream!"

Across from her, Tsunade stood very still, her eyes wide in stunned silence as the young girl's words made their way through the fog of her alcohol-soaked brain. For moment, as she stared at her, the little blonde was replaced by the shadow of another - a young boy with wild, brown hair and bright, determined eyes. 'Nawaki...' Her gaze went to the ground as she was suddenly overcome by memories. 'Dan...'

Naruto balked as the other woman suddenly lowered her guard. 'Now's my chance...!' She'd show this hag once and for all. She held out her hand, drawing chakra into her palm once more. 'Force and focus,' she reminded herself. 'Just like before...' Before long, the chakra coalesced into an orb-
like form and she surged forward, intending to charge the older woman head on. "Take this!"

Tsunade's eyes snapped upward, zeroing in on the young ninja's hand in alarm. "Wait, that's---"

Shizune's expression mirrored her own. "Yondaime-sama's jutsu?!"

Jiraiya eyed the chakra collecting in the blonde's hand, unsure of whether to be disappointed or pretty damn impressed. It seemed his hotheaded apprentice had decided to forgo the third step and try the 4th's jutsu out on a live target. 'Sheesh... it's no wonder they're fighting... the two of them are both quick to anger... you'd think they were the ones related...' He gazed over at his old teammate, frowning slightly when he realized that she still too stunned to move. Now that wouldn't do at all; though it was still incomplete, even an incomplete Rasengan could do a considerable amount of damage if it connected. "Ya better move out of the way, Tsunade!" he called out.

The older blonde jumped, moving forward and slapping Naruto's hand aside at the last minute. Her balance effectively thrown off, the genin tripped and fell. Her Rasengan hit the ground first, leaving behind a rather large, spiral-shaped hole.

Unfazed, Naruto rose to her feet and jumped back, prepared to have another go. "Why you--"

"That's enough, kid," Jiraiya was suddenly beside her, holding her back with a hand on her shoulder. "I think you've caused enough damage for one night."

Though she was still a bit shaken, Tsunade covered up her surprise with a loud scoff. "You're just as bad, Jiraiya," she said with a sneer. "Where do you get off tryin' to teach a genin an A-Rank jutsu like the Rasengan?"

Naruto stilled in surprise. 'It's an A-Rank?'

"You oughta be ashamed gettin' the kid's hopes up like that," the Slug Sannin went on. "Nobody can master that jutsu but you an' him. For anybody else to even try is just a big waste of time!"

"You don't know that!" Naruto countered. "I'll get this jutsu down, just you watch!"

The other blonde turned her way, a mischievous smirk making its way to her face once more. "Oh yeah?" she countered. "Tell you what, we'll make a bet. You master the Rasengan in one week and I'll admit that I was wrong about you and take back all the things I said." She paused, reaching up to her pendant. "To sweeten the deal," She lifted it over her head, holding it out for the younger blonde to see. "I'll even throw in this necklace."

Shizune stared at her, aghast. "Tsunade-sama, you can't!"

Blue eyes studied the small, green stone pendant hanging from the necklace before turning back the older woman doubtfully. "What would I want with that thing?"

Behind her, Jiraiya let out a short bark of laughter. "That *thing*," he explained. "Once belonged to the Shodaime. Its value is so great, you could buy three whole mountains - and then some!"

The young blonde gaped up at him in disbelief. "Three whole mountains??" She turned back to Tsunade, incredulous. "Why would you bet something so valuable?"
The older woman shrugged. "'Cuz I know it's not going anywhere." She smirked at the scowl she received in response. "So, what's it gonna be, kid? You in? I'll understand if you wanna back out-"

"Like Hell I will!" Naruto snarled. "I'll take your stupid bet! I don't back down and I sure as Hell don't run way - that's my nindo!"

Tsunade fell into silence again, once more painfully reminded of a ghost from her past. 'Nawaki...' She recovered quickly, scowling at herself for her moment of weakness before turning to walk away. "See you in one week, kid."

Shizune gave them a worried look before trotting dutifully after her mistress.

Jiraiya watched them depart, a worried frown making its way to his face once more. 'Tsunade... what's happened to you...?"

End Chapter 25b
Chapter 26 - Gamble

Chapter 26

Though she was approaching thirty, Shizune still considered herself to be a young woman in her prime – being overwrought with tension and anxiety certainly did nothing for her health or her looks. Not that she was overly vain or any such ridiculous notion, but she was too young to have worry lines! Those superficial reasons aside, Shizune *really* did not like to worry. Of course, this in itself was very ironic considering that the amount of time she spent on that particular activity seemed to be increasing. She was assistant to Konoha's Princess Tsunade, sole female and medical genius of the Legendary Three. The woman wasn’t exactly high maintenance, per se – in actuality, Shizune looked up to the older woman and enjoyed her company greatly – but despite her 50 years of age, keeping up with her mistress took work!

‘I’m a doctor, not an accountant,’ the young woman grumbled to herself, grimacing at the thought of how many times she had scrambled to keep accurate records of her mistress’ available funds. Gods forbid they run out of money in some backwater village – it had happened once before and Shizune was in no hurry to repeat the experience. She sighed in resignation, casting Tonton a look. The little pig returned it with a sympathetic ‘oink’. “Boy, do I wish Tsunade-sama wouldn’t gamble so much…”

“Oink…”

The brunette sighed once more, her expression darkening in remembrance of the most recent direction her mistress’s habit had taken. To think that the woman had actually set up a bet with a genin…?!

Tsunade’s smirking face appeared in her mind’s eye, her words echoing loudly in her brain. ~ “You master the Rasengan in one week and I’ll admit I was wrong and take back all the things I said…” ~

Master the Rasengan – Yondaime-sama’s original A-rank jutsu? In a week no less! To even contemplate attempting such a thing seemed absolutely ludicrous, but the little blonde had accepted her lady’s terms without batting an eye.

‘Naruto-kun…’ she thought to herself, remembering the furious little spitfire that had accompanied Jiraiya into the tavern. ‘Well… Jiraiya-sama certainly is consistent…’ She thought of the white haired Sage who had accompanied Tsunade to another tavern in what she hoped was an attempt to get her to see reason. After all, she’d thrown Shodaime-sama’s necklace into the deal!

The sound of footsteps approaching from down the hall roused Shizune out of her thoughts and to her feet. Peering out of the room she had rented for Tsunade, Tonton, and herself, she spotted Jiraiya’s apprentice quietly padding down the hall towards her, blonde locks damp from a recent shower.

Knowing that this might be her only opportunity to talk some sense into the youth, Shizune stepped out into the hall, greeting her with a small smile. “Naruto-kun, hello…”

The blonde stopped, blinking up at her curiously. A frown passed over the whiskered face briefly
– no doubt in memory of their last encounter – before being quickly smothered by a mask of indifference. “H’lo… Shizune-san… right?” The older woman nodded encouragingly. Unfazed, Naruto gave a little nod of acknowledgement before turning towards the room she would be sharing with Jiraiya. “Well, see ya.”

“Naruto-kun, wait!” Shizune followed after her, stopping in the doorway of their room. The little blonde glanced back up at her, blue eyes curious. Letting out a heavy sigh, Shizune bowed her head in apology. “I apologize for my lady’s behavior this evening…” she said softly. “She’s… well, you saw how much she’d had to drink. I promise you – she’s not usually like this…”

“What, you mean bitter, violent, and mean?” the blonde asked, causing Shizune to tense. “Look, I don’t care what Ero-sennin has to say about her, there’s no way she’s becoming the next Hokage.”

“Ero…sennin…?” Did she really refer to the Legendary Jiraiya of Myoboku-zan as a perverted sage? ‘Well, if the shoe fits…’ Shizune paused again when the rest of the blonde’s words caught up to her, bringing a frown to her face once more. “Please don’t speak of Tsunade-sama that way,” she admonished lightly. “You don’t even know her!”

“She doesn’t know me either,” Naruto countered. “But she seemed to be pretty set in her opinion of me.”

Shizune flinched again, knowing that like her Tsunade had realized who… or perhaps what the blonde was moment Jiraiya introduced her. She sighed again, lowering her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “It’s just… Tsunade-sama has changed so much! She never used to be so harsh towards people. Ever since she lost them…”

Blue eyes glanced back up at her. “Lost who…?”

The older kunoichi paused, debating whether or not to continue. After a few moments she spoke again. “Her fiancé… my uncle Dan,” she finally murmured. “And her younger brother Nawaki; they were both killed during the war.” Blue eyes widened in surprise… and perhaps understanding? Encouraged by such a response, Shizune continued. “To be a medic in the field during such turbulent times, saving the lives of so many only to have the lives of those most precious to you slip through your fingers…” She closed her eyes. “It was more than Tsunade-sama could bear…”

Listening to her words, Naruto held back a heavy sigh. To fight so hard to protect people that would probably remain strangers to you, only to lose your loved ones in the process. Though she was an orphan, she’d experienced the pain of loss deeply enough to know how much it hurt, that it was difficult to scrounge up the strength to keep going. Despite that however she had gotten up and continued moving forward. For someone like Tsunade, who was supposed to be so great – a Slug Summoner for crying out loud – to turn her back on the people she had sworn to protect…

There was a low snarl, faint and distant in the back of her mind, ~SHE ALLOWED THAT ACCURSED WORM TO ESCAPE OUR GRASP…~

‘Kyuubi…?’ Blue eyes blinked in confusion; it had been so long since she had felt the fox’s presence. What would cause him to get so worked up now…?

“Naruto-kun…?”

Naruto turned her attention back towards the older woman, frowning in disapproval. “She’s
hurting… I get that,” she murmured. “But just because her loved ones are gone doesn’t give her
the right to stand by while the murderer of the man who made her into the ninja she is today goes
free…” Her eyes hardened angrily, resembling polished steel. “How would her loved ones feel
about that if they knew…?”

Shizune bowed her head once more, flushing lightly in shame. “You’re right…” she murmured
quietly. “But you don’t understand…”

“I don’t need to.” The small blonde turned away from her, toweling her hair dry. “I don’t mean to
be rude or anything, but I really don’t have time for any apologies or excuses…” She paused,
glancing back up at her. “Besides, it doesn’t really mean a thing unless I hear it from the old lady
herself…” A mischievous grin made itself visible across her whiskered face. “Which I will when I
win her stupid bet!”

Recalling the reason she’d sought out the genin in the first place, Shizune took another step into
the room, her expression belying her urgency. “That’s what I came to speak to you about, Naruto-
kun,” she exclaimed. The blonde blinked at her with a ‘Huh?’ expression on her face. “You must
not take Tsunade-sama up on her bet! You’ll die if you do!”

The genin frowned up at her. “I’m gonna master the Rasengan,” she insisted. “You just watch—”

“I don’t mean that—” Shizune cut in, despite how much she doubted that statement. The little
blonde had certainly displayed a lot a skill in her brief bout against her mistress, but some things
just weren’t possible – especially for a Genin! “I’m talking about Tsunade-sama’s necklace…”
She frowned, still unable to believe that her mistress had even included it in the wager. Just what
had she been thinking? “It’s true that it’s very valuable, but it’s also cursed; aside from my
mistress, all the other people it has been entrusted to have died horrible deaths!”

A cursed piece of jewelry? Naruto let out an incredulous snort. “I don’t care,” she
replied. Shizune let out a gasp of surprise. “I told you before that I didn’t want the stupid
thing. Protecting my family and my village is my only concern right now and I hafta learn the
Rasengan to do it. The sooner I learn it, the sooner I can get back home to them.”

Shizune remained silent, staring at her in awe.

Naruto walked over to the dresser where she had set her hitai-ate, wrapping it around her head
before marching back to the door by where Shizune stood to retrieve her sandals. “Now, if you’ll
excuse me,” The brunette continued to stare. “I’m gonna go out and train. I’ve got a bet to win,
after all.” Without waiting for a response – Shizune was still too stunned to give one, really –
Naruto exited the room and vanished down the hall.

To think that a genin actually planned to master the Rasengan - a jutsu that had taken its creator
three years to master – in a week! Shizune didn’t know whether such a thing was possible but she
had the distinct impression the little blonde was not going to stop until she found out. Stepping out
of the room quietly, she turned her attention back to Tonton who was watching her from their room
across the hall.

“Tonton,” she murmured despairingly. “I’m going to be gray before I’m 30…”

“Ohink!”

ooo
Many of the bars and taverns had shut down hours before, their patrons and proprietors retreating to their homes for a good night’s rest. Tsunade however, remained awake, walking the deserted streets in a daze. The haze of alcohol had long since worn off – one of the perks of being a medical genius, she supposed – but she was still weary, her mind caught adrift in the memories of all the recent events that had taken place.

Sarutobi-sensei was dead at Orochimaru’s hand. The village wanted her – of all people - to become Godaime Hokage… While these two facts weighed heavily upon her, it was her conversation with Jiraiya that truly had her on edge. Following the incident at the diner, her old teammate had instructed Shizune to secure rooms for all of them while they ‘caught up’. At first she had suspected an attempt at foul play – Jiraiya was nothing if not a deplorable skirt chaser - but soon after she recognized it as an attempt at getting more information out of her without any interruptions.

She’d expected his usual feeble attempts at cunning; perhaps mindless small talk while he looked for an opening – after all, subtlety had never been one of Jiraiya’s strong suits. So naturally it came as a complete surprise when the other ninja decided to be completely blunt.

oo Flashback oo

“So,” Seated beside her at the small little stand nursing a small cup of warm sake, Jiraiya’s tone had been as casual as his posture. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, his expression carefully neutral. “What did Orochimaru want?”

Tsunade’s cup paused halfway to its destination before resuming its path to her lips. Amber eyes darted to his face quickly only to vanish beneath dark lashes. “Who says he wanted anything?” she countered coyly.

Jiraiya smirked, although the expression did not reach his eyes. “You expect me to believe his visit was purely social?”

She was silent for several moments, setting down her cup to refill it. “I don’t really see how it’s any of your business.”

“Tsunade,” The humor was gone from his voice now. “He murdered our Sensei.”

“And countless others, I’m sure,” she retorted. “How does that have anything to do with me?”

This time Jiraiya was silent, studying the woman beside him as if she were someone he didn’t recognize. After a few moments a disapproving frown made its way across his face; she pretended not to notice. “You really have changed, haven’t you?”

Funny how her other teammate had mentioned something similar…

After a few moments with no response, Jiraiya rose to his feet. “Well, I’m gonna call it a night…” Stepping away from the bar, he set down money on the counter which the proprietor accepted with a gracious nod. He took a few steps away only to stop and gaze back at her. “Please consider the village’s offer carefully, Tsunade…” he murmured. Tsunade remained silent. He turned away, rubbing a hand across his face with a sigh. “I’d hate to think the kid was right about you…”

She listened as his footsteps faded away but still did not respond, frowning down at the reflection
Tsunade paused in her trek, recounting the little blonde’s words back in the bar. It was startling to hear such talk from one so small, but the Sannin found it was the genin’s declaration rather than insults that had really caught her attention.

~ “I made a vow to him and myself that one day I’d become the greatest Hokage and protect everyone! That is my dream!” ~

The words were familiar and dredged up old memories that she thought had been buried deep beneath all the gambling and alcohol. A hand absently went to the pendant hanging from her neck, followed by a frustrated frown at the brief moment of weakness.

She shook her head, grimacing in irritation. “Annoying little brat,” she muttered under her breath. “What does a kid know…?” She paused, realizing that her feet had brought her to the edge of town. Preparing to turn back and perhaps call it a night, she paused at the sudden surged of chakra that rushed over her. Skilled senses tracking the source, amber eyes fell upon a familiar orange clad genin standing in a nearby clearing.

The blonde stood in the middle of a field sans that ugly orange and blue travesty of a jacket, breathing heavily as she focused her gaze on a tree a few feet in front of her. The tree’s trunk was riddled with large spiraling groves no doubt acquired from her training.

“Damn it,” she muttered, drawing her brows together in a frustrated frown. “Still not there yet…” She dragged a bandage wrapped arm across her sweaty brow before drawing her hands together once more to gather chakra. “Well then, I’ll just hafta try it again!” Chakra surged across the clearing like a pulse and much like before in front of the tavern, an imperfect Rasengan appeared in her cupped hands only to be slammed into the old bark before her. The blonde vanished behind a cloud of sawdust and the only indication Tsunade had that she was still present was another loud curse of frustration.

Having expected such a reaction, Tsunade turned and walked away. The little brat was loud, rude, obnoxious, and as stubborn as a mule…

‘Just like Nawaki…”

Despite her best efforts, the mere mention of the name dragged old forgotten memories to the surface of her heart and mind. Bright brown eyes, a wide and eager toothy grin, all housed beneath an unkempt mop of mousey brown hair. She remembered running her hands through those same locks after tending to one of his oft-acquired injuries. Nawaki had always been a bit reckless – even when the village was in a state of war.

~ “Honestly, Nawaki, you hafta stop being so reckless!” ~ She couldn’t recall how many times she’d given the same lecture but each time her younger brother had fixed her with a sullen pout that was quickly followed after by a mischievous grin. Little knucklehead… ~ “There is a war going on, you know. If a fight breaks out during one of your missions, I want you to run away – understand?” ~

~ “No way! I’m a ninja of the Leaf, too! I’m never gonna run way!” ~
A bitter smile rose to Tsunade’s lips at the memory. Hardheaded little punk… Though he’d been young and in experienced, her Nawaki had been brave. He’d wanted to protect the village that their grandfather had founded. He wanted to carry on the Shodaime’s legacy.

An obnoxious little blonde flashed through her mind again. ~ “I don’t back down and I sure as hell don’t run away!” ~

~ “…I’m a ninja of the Leaf…” ~

~ “…Cuz that’s my nindo…” ~

Tsunade slowly came to a stop, her smile quickly fading to a dark frown. Amber eyes, filled with a bitter mixture of sadness and anger, turned skyward before closing shut in resignation.

“…Damn it…”

ooo

Biting his lip against the scream threatening to spill from his throat, Orochimaru sat as still as stone as Kabuto set about the arduous task of redressing the bandages on his arms. As they had been sealed by his treacherous sensei, the flesh was slowly starting to break down; it wouldn’t be long before his arms were gone completely…

This could not be allowed… He *would* undo the damage that had been done.

“Soon…” There was a sharp glint of light as bespectacled eyes met his in curiosity. “In a few days time my arms will be restored to me…”

Kabuto finished tying off the last bandage before daring to speak. “How can you be certain?” he asked, his tone and expression neutral. “Do you think she’ll actually show?”

Recalling his old teammate’s reaction to his offer, a confident smirk stole across the Snake Sannin’s face. “There is no one who knows Tsunade better than I,” he answered, rising to his feet. “She’ll show…” He glanced back at Kabuto once more, his eyes gleaming in excitement. “You can bet on it.”

ooo

Carrying out her normal rounds of the patient wards, Nurse Nanao paused outside of room 307 to quietly peer inside at the room’s occupants. Like every other morning she had passed by, the room’s patient lay silent on the bed, unresponsive and oblivious to the goings on around him. And each morning the young pink haired girl arrived, replaced the flower on his bed stand with a new one, and sat down by his bedside to read through some scroll or text for the next few hours.

“She here again?”

The mousy nurse nearly squeaked in surprise, clapping a hand over her mouth quickly to keep from spoiling what she thought to be such a romantic moment. A young girl waiting for her sweetheart to awaken – how much more adorable could you get? She turned her head, fixing her co-worker with an amused – if not slightly irritated – grin. “She’s here just about every day,” she whispered. “She just sits with him… almost as if she’s waiting…”
“For him to wake up?” the other nurse asked, frowning uncertainly. “No one’s been able to figure out how to undo the genjutsu he’s under yet, have they?”

“No, not yet,” Nanao answered with a sigh. Though she didn’t really know any of the particulars, she was aware that the Uchiha boy had been in pretty bad shape when he had first arrived. His injuries had healed completely, but because of the genjutsu he had undergone, he had yet to resume consciousness. So tragic… “But she hasn’t given up hope yet,” She paused, watching as the girl paused in her reading to fix the young boy with a gentle smile. “And right now, I suppose that’s all that matters…”

ooo

The darkness stretched on forever it seemed; the very fact that he could see his own hand in front of his face seemed to defy all logic, but since ninja tended to rely more on instinct than logic, he decided not to dwell on it. There were more important things to consider, after all.

Sasuke turned his body in a circle, feeling frustrated and wary when the action yielded no satisfactory results. There was only darkness, darkness, and even more darkness.

Hadn’t he just been fighting in a hotel corridor only moments ago? The young Uchiha found it very troubling that he couldn’t remember.

“Wha… what is this…?” He frowned, recalling 3-tomoe Sharingan, screeching Chidori, mind-numbing pain, and someone calling his name. “Where’s Itachi…? And Naruto…?”

Suddenly the world around him tilted, muted colors bleeding through the darkness to shift and change until he found himself standing in the middle of a large room he found painfully familiar. Dark eyes widened in horror at the red and white fan painted in sharp, bright colors on a shoji screen. ‘But that… that’s impossible…’ He turned, spotting the three figures positioned at the end of the room. His mother, his father, on their knees before a dark shadow with his katana raised…

He surged forward, his arm raised to warn them, ward him off, anything! “NO, DON’T!!!”

Fully formed Sharingan raised to meet his own horror-struck gaze, their crimson depths revealing nothing. There was no victory, no anger, no remorse… nothing… How could he show no emotion with what he was about to do?

“Sasuke…” The younger Uchiha gazed back at him, his body trembling. Why couldn’t he move? Itachi allowed his eyes to slowly drift shut. “You are still too weak…”

Powerless to move, Sasuke could only watch helplessly as he brought his blade down in a sharp arc, watching impassively as the bodies of their parents dropped to the ground. For several moments, the bodies just lay there staining the finely polished floorboards red. A few seconds seemed to stretch on into an eternity before he finally found the will to move. Sharingan flashing, he charged towards his brother, kunai in hand. “ITACHI---wha…?”

Just as he prepared to deliver a fatal blow, the world around Sasuke shifted once again, morphing into one of the main streets of the Uchiha complex. He could only stare in horrified confusion as his each of kinsmen fell lifeless to the ground one by one, cut down by an invisible assailant.

“What… what the hell is this…?” Sasuke knew this had to be a dream, an illusion of some sort,
but knowing and accepting were two different things.

Itachi’s voice seemed to echo around him, mocking and taunting while maintaining that same monotonous drone. “Weak…”

“No! I’m not weak!” Tossing his kunai into the dirt, Sasuke took off down the familiar street, his home his destination. He knew it was a dream, but he wasn’t a kid anymore! He’d had nightmares similar to this one ever since that horrible night. He wouldn’t allow it to control him anymore. “This time I can stop him! I can stop this – I won’t let them die!”

His old home came up in his sights in record time, and Sasuke wasted no time bursting through the gates and into the house proper. Not wasting any time to remove his shoes at the genkan, he prepared to dash towards the dojo only to trip and stumble over a solid object lying in his path. He landed on top of it with a loud grunt, preparing to fix it with an annoyed glare when he realized said object was wearing a Jounin vest.

Familiar gray hair fell in his line of vision and the normally stoic genin had to hold back a scream at the sight of his teacher laying lifeless beneath him. Kakashi’s face was far paler than normal, his normal dark eye hazed over in death while his Sharingan… needless to say it was gone.

“Ka…Kakashi…” Before he could think of anything to say, Sasuke’s words were cut off by a terrified scream coming from down the hall. He frowned in confusion, knowing the sound was far too young to have come from his mother. At that thought, Sharingan eyes widened in horror as he jumped up and rushed to the dojo once more. Pushing it open to hard it nearly fell off its track, Sasuke was met with a different sight than the one he had seen before.

All things considered, he didn’t like it any better than any of the times before.

Instead of his parents’ proud figures with their heads bowed in defeat, both his teammates knelt side by side, their heads lowered as Itachi prepared to deliver his blade’s deadly kiss.

“Little brother… You are still too weak…”

The last thing Sasuke remembered was screaming – he was almost certain that it was his own – before the world faded to black…

…Only to start all over again.

ooo

“Good bye, Senpai!”

“Bai bai, Senpai!”

His face flushed and his clothes reeking of alcohol and women’s perfume, Jiraiya turned back towards the teahouse he had just exited, giving the three young women who had been his company for the evening a cheery wave. They were nice, really – they certainly had shown him a good time.

“See ya later, girls,” he chuckled. “It’s been fun!”

One the young women, a green-eyed redhead with the cutest freckles, giggled delightedly. “You
take care, Jiraiya-senpai!” she chirped. “And be sure to come and see us again, too!”

“You miss me already, eh?” The Sannin grinned widely, ambling back up to the door while eliciting a squeal of laughter from the three women. “I’m sure I can stay just a bit longer…”

“Oooh, Jiraiya-senpai!”

“You’re so naughty!”

He laughed heartily, flipping his hair back. “You know you love it!” Serving the girls with another wave, he headed off down the street back towards the inn. He really had had a good time – the food was great, the sake had been superb, and his company certainly had been very entertaining. To make things even better, with no loud, blonde squirts interrupting him at every possible moment, he had managed to get quite a few updates from the goings on within his spy network.

‘Ahh… I love it when everything goes according to plan…’ he thought to himself. After all, the situation regarding his teammate certainly hadn’t been going the way he’d expected. While he’d known she would be less than keen on the proposal he’d presented her with, he certainly hadn’t expected she and his apprentice to clash so… violently.

The fury in both blondes’ eyes as they faced each other was enough to put a battle-hardened ninja on edge, but he had to congratulate the runt for sticking to her guns and not backing down. Had he not been trying to stay on her good side, he certainly would have had something to say to Tsunade about the disrespect she had shown the two previous Hokage.

‘But to actually accept such an outrageous wager just to prove a point…’ Jiraiya was willing to admit that Naruto had shown amazing promise as a ninja since leaving Konoha all those weeks ago, but her progress seemed to have slowed to a stop upon reaching the third step of her training. Did she really expect to master the Rasengan in… here he paused try to recall how many days had passed since their encounter at the tavern… two days?

He paused upon reaching their assigned room, peering into the space to find it empty of any loud blondes. He wasn’t all that surprised; it seemed as if the little runt had been practicing non-stop. Removing his vest and hitai-ate, Jiraiya sat down on his bed with a groan, eyeing the large pack that lay forgotten on the twin bed beside his. He hadn’t seen hide nor hair of the little brat since the altercation at the tavern – was it possible she was sleeping wherever it was she was training?

~ “You’re gonna get this jutsu down, Uzumaki Naru – even if it takes all the chakra you’ve got!” ~

She was determined to see this thing through it seemed, especially considering the fact that the welfare of her teammates was at stake. If there was anyone able to match Tsunade in stubbornness, Jiraiya was certain that Naruto was that person. If winning the Slug Mistress' bet wasn’t enough to make her see reason, Jiraiya wasn’t sure anything else would.

Letting out a sigh, he flopped onto his back, staring upwards at the ceiling. “Tsunade… Naruto… I hope you two know what you’re doing…”

ooo

“So, where’s your brat?”
Jiraiya glanced up from his midday meal to see Tsunade regarding him with a bored smirk. To say he was surprised that she actually sought him out – and not the other way around – would be an understatement. However, true to his nature, he managed to keep his reaction subdued.

“Naruto…?” He paused, taking another bite of his meal. “Dunno… still out training, I s’pose.”

“Puh,” Tsunade rolled her eyes, taking a seat beside him casually as if they were two old friends meeting for lunch. After giving a brief order to the chef, she turned her attention back to the ninja beside her. “She’s wasting her time.”

This time Jiraiya did blink in surprise. “You knew she was a girl?”

“Of course,” she answered, as if the answer should be obvious. The Toad Sage fought not to grimace – he never had liked that know-it-all attitude of hers. “You can tell just by looking at her.”

“Heh… I couldn’t,” he paused, recounting their first meeting on that rooftop back in Konoha. Had it only been a few months ago? He’d known who she was just by looking at her – it had almost been like looking at a ghost of the past - but her gender…? “She’s the spittin’ image of him.”

Tsunade paused as she poured out a cup of sake for herself. “Careful, Jiraiya,” she murmured. “You can’t just be stuck in the past.”

“I wouldn’t be the only one.”

When the blonde didn’t respond, the two spent the next few minutes in tense silence.

His eyes downcast, Jiraiya helped himself to some of her sake before daring to break the silence. “You should have come home.”

The imperceptible twitch did not go unnoticed by his sharp eye. “What for?” she snapped in irritation.

“What for?” he echoed quietly, his expression incredulous as he finally met her gaze. “You could have made a difference!”

A scowl passed across her face before she spoke again. “It didn’t make a difference before…” she replied. “Why should that time have been any different?”

“She would have only lost one instead of both…”

Her cup slamming onto the table, Tsunade faced him with a fierce glare before quickly rising to her feet. She turned to leave, halted by his hand on her sleeve.

Confident that she wouldn’t leave, he ignored her questioning look, ordering another pitcher of sake. When it arrived a few moments later, he released her sleeve to quietly set about the task of refilling both of their cups as if nothing were amiss.

Though she was a bit nonplussed about his behavior, Tsunade resumed her seat at the table, studying both him and her sake carefully. Despite her aloof attitude, the medical genius actually found his calm demeanor to be a bit disconcerting. After all, didn’t he have a right to be angry with him? She’d received word of the Konoha’s plight almost 13 years ago just as he had, and she had
been far closer to the village than he had. Yet… she hadn’t gone to help.

She… she couldn’t… She’d been too weak.

Unbidden, Orochimaru’s face appeared in her mind, his words stabbing through her heart like a blade.

~ “To be able to have your fiancé and beloved little brother back in your arms again...” ~

~ “Heal my arms and I will bring Dan and Nawaki back to life.” ~

~ “Take a week to decide. We’ll be back for your answer then.” ~

Not wanting to dwell on such thoughts, Tsunade closed her eyes, letting the warm alcohol slide down her throat.

After a few moments later, the white haired man beside her let out a quiet chuckle. “Isn’t this somethin’?” he mused. “Two old friends reminiscing over sake?”

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye while letting out a noncommittal ‘hmph’. “Just like old times…?”

He met her gaze, smirking lightly. “Yeah…” He paused, his eyes turning slightly wistful as he was overcome with nostalgia. “’Cept he never could hold his liquor. Always ended up with the mother of all hangovers… and man did he ever get pissy…”

Tsunade blinked in surprise before letting out a breath that could have been construed as a chuckle. “That’s true…” she agreed. “I ended up coming up with a hangover remedy just for him…” She trailed off, remembering the small little pouch of powder she currently carried in her pocket. Casting her companion a sharp look, she reached into her jacket pocket, fingering the little package uncertainly even though she continued on as if nothing was amiss. “Sensei was so impressed with it that he had it included in all Jounin field kits.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Jiraiya chuckled, patting the pouch he carried at his side with a grin. “I always carry some with me, y’know. It’s gotten me out of a few messes, lemme tell ya.”

“I bet.” At her slanted eye look, the old hermit laughed again.

“What can I say?” he laughed again, turning his attention back to the cook. With his attention elsewhere, Tsunade quickly added the innocuous white powder to his drink, frowning at his back all the while. “Hey, chef! Can I order the House Special for my lady friend here? She needs some food to go with this sake!”

“Comin’ right up!”

Turning his attention back to Tsunade, Jiraiya let out a heavy sigh. “I still have a hard time believing things turned out the way they did,” he murmured. “Especially now… I know they didn’t see eye to eye, but Sensei was a good guy, y’know? It’s gonna be tough without him.”

Memories of the wise ninja that had taught her so much zipped through her mind and Tsunade found herself raising her sake cup in a toast. Her amber eyes met his startled dark ones. “To Sarutobi-sensei.”
Jiraiya didn’t miss a beat, raising his cup to meet hers. “To Sarutobi-sensei.” After a moment of silence, he brought the cup to his lips, downing the liquid in one shot.

~ “How does it feel, I wonder, to know you sent two loved ones off to their horrific deaths…?” ~

~ “All I need are my arms back…” ~

~ “And two human sacrifices…” ~

For the briefest of moments Tsunade wondered if Nawaki and Dan could see her now. Would they be ashamed…?

~ “She doesn’t care about anyone but herself – it’s disgusting!” ~

She recalled the steely eyed glare the little blonde had sent her way. Jiraiya had looked at her and saw his old student – the student he had been unable to protect. She looked at her and saw her little Nawaki – the beloved little brother she had betrayed.

It seemed Naruto was right, after all – she really was pathetic.

~ End Chapter 26
Chapter 27 - Conflict

Chapter Summary

Tsunade lifted her head but still did not turn to meet his gaze. "I will heal your arms, Orochimaru," she murmured quietly. "But you will leave Konoha and its people alone."

Chapter 27

Shizune gazed down at the little blonde currently occupying her bed with an anxious frown. Her worrying nature having gotten the better of her – could she help it if she didn’t want gray hairs? – she had decided one more time to try and convince the little genin to see reason. Scouring every inch of town had taken quite a bit of time, even with the aid of Tonton’s nose. She’d been ready to give up the search when she stumbled across the blonde just as she collapsed to the ground following another failed attempt at the Rasengan.

Remembering the state the small clearing had been upon her arrival, the medic was certain the young kunoichi had been at it non-stop. Given the state of her clothing, the bright orange material dull underneath layers of sawdust and dirt, Shizune deduced the kunoichi had probably slept at that location as well.

‘Training day and night to master a jutsu that only two others have accomplished…’ Her dark eyes darkened further in worry as Naruto grimaced in discomfort, muttering something unintelligible in her sleep. ‘Does Jiraiya-sama always allow her to run herself into the ground like this…?’ Despite her deep respect for the older ninja, both the woman and medic in her railed angrily at the thought. ‘That’s absolutely inexcusable!’

Sitting in a chair by the bedside, Tonton let out a small oink of concern.

Turning her attention from her patient briefly, Shizune fixed the little pig with a smile. "No worries, Tonton," she promised. "Naruto-kun’s in good hands… we’ll have her fixed up in no time."

"Oink!"

The door to their room opened suddenly and in stepped Tsunade, amber eyes falling on the scene in surprise and curiosity. "What is this?"

"Tsunade-sama!" Shizune rose to her feet quickly, giving her mistress a quick bow. The older blonde didn’t respond, choosing instead to cross the room in a few quick strides to peer down at young girl lying asleep on the bed. Her assistant followed her gaze, frowning slightly. "I found her outside of town..." she explained softly. "She had collapsed during her training."

Again Tsunade remained silent, years of training causing her to assess the patient with her own eyes. ‘Chakra exhaustion…’ She paused, her amber eyes falling on the girl's hands - the normal, thick wrappings replaced with softer, medical bandages - lying limp on top of the comforter. ‘And
serious chakra burns…” Finished with her own assessment, she closed her eyes, folding her arms across her chest with a sigh. "She’s not in any danger," she replied. "But she’ll be out of the picture two days tops."

That meant her chance of winning the bet was now impossible. Though she had expected as much from the beginning, Shizune couldn’t help but feel sorry for the young girl. She’d tried so hard… "Naruto…"

Glancing up at her assistant, who was too busy studying her patient worriedly to notice, Tsunade followed her gaze back to the little blonde as well. She was willing to admit – at least to herself – that she looked so much smaller lying there still and silent on the bed. All that spunk and energy… had the kid really run herself into the ground like that…?

~ "You don’t know that! I’ll get this jutsu, just you watch!" ~

She closed her eyes once more, letting out a breath through her nose. "The kid pushed herself to the brink just because of a stupid bet I made…” She paused, a slight crease forming in her brow. "Shizune, just how far have I fallen…?"

The brunette shifted in her seat, turning worried her way. "Tsunade-sama…"

With great effort, Tsunade gathered up the guilt threatening to eat away at her, forcing it down and replacing it with her usual air of indifference. "Whatever," she scoffed, glancing away once more. "It’s not like I twisted the brat’s arm or anything… It’s her own fault…”

"Tsunade-sama," Shizune frowned slightly. "I have to ask… If you knew she’d lose, why did you offer her the bet in the first place?"

The older blonde shrugged off-handedly. "Didn’t think she’d actually take it," she answered. "But… since she’s a student of Jiraiya’s, I sp’ose I should’ve have known better. The last one didn’t know his own limits either."

"I see…" The younger woman was silent for several long moments, staring at her hands. After what seemed like an eternity, she lifted her gaze towards her mistress once more, her dark eyes serious. "About the bet…” she began cautiously, knowing that she had to choose her next words very carefully. The brief look the older blonde gave her before glancing away once more plainly said as much. "You gave Naruto-kun until tomorrow to master the Rasengan…” She paused, frowning slightly in remembrance. "The same amount of time Orochimaru gave you to consider his offer."

"Oh, is that right? What about it?"

Shizune rose to her feet, taking a few steps towards the Sannin. "Tsunade-sama," she gasped. "Please tell me you aren’t actually considering his offer?" When no denial came forth, she took a few more steps forward. "Because if you are…” She paused, her expression turning gravely serious despite the panic and worry still evident in her eyes. Though she couldn’t believe the next words were going to come out of her mouth, she believed that they had to be said. She raised her arms, tensing her body slightly in preparation. "I’ll do everything I can to stop you – even if it takes my life!"

The room quickly fell into silence, the tension thick enough to cut with a kunai.
Tonton gazed back and forth between his two human companions, letting out a worried oink.

Tsunade closed her eyes, letting out a quiet breath that may have been a laugh. "...‘even if it takes your life’, huh...?" She opened them once more, narrowing them as she stared down her assistant in anger. "Shizune, have you forgotten who it is you’re talking to?"

Despite her own skill as a ninja, the dark haired kunoichi froze, letting out a small whimper of dismay. She remained rooted to the floor as her mistress strode towards her in quick, angry steps, eyes widening in shock and surprise as her body registered a sharp, jolt of pain.

After that, the world went black.

ooo

Kuninobu Takeshi, owner and proprietor of one of the many small food stands dotting the city, blinked in surprise at the sight that greeted him upon his arrival to work. The same large, white haired man who had graced his stand the night before lay drunkenly slouched against the counter like an old lush. Though Takeshi had been known to wake up in places far stranger, he hadn’t pegged the older man to be the type.

"Specially considering the knockout he was with last night," he thought to himself, remembering the young blonde with the very lovely...erm...eyes, that had shared a couple of drinks with him. Considering the amount they’d had combined, he had figured they would’ve woken up someplace else... together...

"Ah well," he muttered aloud, giving the old ninja a sympathetic shake of the head. "Can’t win’em all I guess..." He paused and then frowned slightly when he realized having an unconscious man draped across his counter would not only impede setting up for the day, but would also be bad for business. Takeshi took a step towards the ninja, leaning forward just slightly. "Hey, old man," he called out. "I know you had a rough night, but you can’t sleep it off here!" When he received no response, his frown deepened slightly in annoyance. "Hey! Did you hear what I said? You don’t gotta go home, but you can’t stay here!" When still no response came, Takeshi decided to take a risk by reaching forward to shake his shoulder. "Hey, buddy—what...?"

The white haired ninja tilted over, falling heavily to the ground with a loud groan.

Takeshi started in surprise, taking in the ashen pallor on the tattooed man’s face. "Hey! You okay, old man? Hey!"

ooo

"...san... o... san..."

Shizune shifted slightly, letting out a groan of pain when her muscles protested the movement. Goodness, she felt terrible! Had she slept on the floor?

"Oi, Neesan!"

Dark eyes snapped open suddenly, zeroing in on the blue eyes peering back at her. Shizune blinked in confusion. ‘Who...?’

"Finally, you’re awake!" the blonde exclaimed from her kneeling position over her. She turned to
address Tonton, who was sitting opposite her. "Good thing, ne, Pinky-chan?"

"Oink!"

"Na… ruto…?" Shizune blinked again, trying to orient herself to her surroundings once more. Remembering the blonde had been unconscious the last time she saw her, the doctor in Shizune rushed to the forefront. "You’re all right?"

"Course, I am!" the blonde explained, grinning as if the answer should have been obvious. "A good night’s rest is usually all I need!"

The dark haired kunoichi sat up slowly, trying to assess the truth of her statement with her own eyes. A few seconds proved the little blonde's statement to be true; she really was fine!

‘Amazing,’ Shizune thought to herself, gazing at the blonde who grinned impishly back and forth between her and Tonton. To think that this same hyperactive youth was the one she’d found pale and unconscious on the outskirts of town. ‘I’ve never seen recuperative abilities like hers before…’ "So, Naruto-san," The blonde turned back to her, blinking curiously. "I take it you’ve mastered the Rasengan?"

Naruto paused, flushing slightly. "Er… no," she answered slowly. "But no worries! I’ll just wing it!"

Wing it… No wonder Jiraiya had taken her on as an apprentice. Shizune laughed despite herself, only to pause, wincing slightly when her body protested the movement. Just as she was about to ponder the cause, her eyes widened in horror as she recalled her altercation with her mistress…

‘Damn it… how long have I…?’ She turned her attention back to the blonde, her entire body tense. "Naruto-san! What day is today? What time?!"

Blue eyes blinked, no doubt confused at her sudden change in behavior. "What…?"

"Tell me, please!"

"It’s Monday… er," She paused to glance briefly at the digital clock on one of the nightstands. "10:30 am."

Shizune tensed again, this time in surprise. ‘So that means she only slept one day…? But then…’ She gasped in alarm. "Tsunade-sama!"

"Huh?" Naruto frowned as the older woman suddenly jumped to her feet. Here she was, worried about her mistress when she was the one the blonde had found unconscious on the floor. Where had her so-called mistress been when she’d been attacked? "What about the old lady?"

"Never mind," Shizune told her, striding quickly over towards the window. Pushing it outward, she placed a sandaled foot up on the sill, preparing to exit. "There’s something I need to do. I need you to stay he—" The rest of her sentence died in her throat as a kunai suddenly thudded against the window frame inches away from her head.

"What the hell??" Naruto rushed to the window, her own kunai already in hand. "Neesan, are you all ri—" Poking her head outside, her eyes widened in surprise at the sight of her ‘sensei’ leaning heavily against the inn’s outer-wall, glaring up at them with heavy, labored breaths. "Ero-Sennin?"
Shizune rushed out to assist him, gasping at his pale and sweaty features. "Jiraiya-sama?" Reaching out to steady him, she was alarmed at how easily his body sagged against hers. ‘Pale pallor, excessive perspiration, labored breathing, lethargy…’ "You’ve been poisoned!"

The blonde that was now standing beside them tensed in shock. "Poisoned?! By who?"

The Sage gazed up at them, letting out a raspy chuckle. "I should’ve known better…” he muttered ruefully. "Nobody knows potions and elixirs better than your mistress, Shizune…"

She gasped. ‘Tsunade-sama did this…?'

"Why that no good…"

"Naruto-san," Shizune called out. "Please go back inside and fetch a pitcher of water and a glass for Jiraiya-sama. We need to re-hydrate him quickly."

Sparing the white haired ninja a quick, worried glance, the blonde gave an obedient nod. "Right."

A few seconds later she vanished back through the window.

Shizune waited a few moments before sparing the Sage a sad glance, bowing her head low in shame. "Forgive me, Jiraiya-sama…"

He was silent a few moments before he looked away as well. "It’s not your fault…"

ooo

Touching down on an old rooftop, Kabuto paused to study the distance between him and his destination. His master had given him a task to accomplish, and though he was determined to carry it out, he planned to do so carefully. It was how he had survived so long, after all.

~ "I’ve no doubt Tsunade will make the right decision." ~ the Snake Sannin had answered silkily when asked about what was to occur when the designated week was up. Despite the situation, he seemed to have no concerns as to whether his requirements would be met. Was it possible that his assumptions about his old teammate were correct?

~ "But to make sure she has no second thoughts…” ~ Despite the many years spent in his service, seeing the sinister smile spread across the pale ninja’s face always put Kabuto on edge. ~ "Her assistant… see to it that she doesn’t get in the way…” ~

He remembered the light skirmish he’d had with the dark haired kunoichi. The woman was the assistant to one of the Legendary Three – it was expected that facing her would be a challenge.

‘A challenge, huh…?’ He smirked ruefully, knowing the only challenge he was truly interested lay back in Konohagakure. His mind recounted the Chuunin exam bout against the Hyuuga and the demonic chakra that had washed over the stadium, and again across the village when the Ichibi had briefly surfaced. To think that so much raw power could be contained within such a small package… it boggled the mind.

‘No worries, though…’ he thought to himself. ‘I’m sure I’ll be able to figure it out soon enough – hm?’ Kabuto paused, coming to stop a few rooftops before his destination. Peering closely behind thick lenses at the hotel in the distance, he spotted his intended target with a familiar white-haired
figure. Realizing it was none other than the third member of the legendary triad, Jiraiya the Toad Sage, he cursed lightly under his breath.

“So he’s here, too…?” he leaned back around the corner of the building, contemplating the situation with a frown. ‘The assistant I can handle, but one of the Three…?’ He peered around the corner again, weighing his options only to pause as a blonde figure dressed in orange climbed out the window. ‘Ah, so Naruto-chan’s here, too?’ Kabuto’s eyes brightened almost immediately as a devious smirk spread across his face. Though his talent lay in medical ninjutsu, it was possible to say he found more enjoyment in causing pain rather than curing it. After all, it was easier to break something than to put it back together. However, his normal hobbies aside, Kabuto wasn’t afraid to admit that the little blonde fascinated him – that in itself was surprising to him as normally, Kabuto rarely found interest in anything that didn’t involve taking it apart.

Perhaps that was what so interested him about the little Leaf genin. His specialty was gathering information, but the Chuunin Exams had proven that there was more to the little shinobi than met the eye. Like many others, she had gotten his attention with her fight with the Hyuuga and since then he had done what he could to find out more about her. Uzumaki Naruto, or Naru as she had come to reveal was, certainly an interesting individual. She had amazing strength and skill. She had more chakra than men twice her age and size. She also had goals. In a few scant years, the little blonde had built up so many high hopes and dreams for herself that she believed in her foolish little heart could actually be accomplished.

He would enjoy tearing them to shreds.

A pleased smirk stole across his face once more. ‘Perhaps this’ll be fun after all,’ Leaning back against the corner once more he vanished from sight, grinning all the while.

ooo

Jiraiya paused with his glass halfway to his lips, almost certain he had spotted a stray movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned his gaze towards a low rooftop in the distance, frowning slightly when there seemed to be nothing there.

"Jiraiya-sama?" the dark haired kunoichi gazed down at him worriedly. "Are you feeling any better?"

"A little…” he admitted, though truthfully he felt terrible. His head ached, all of his limbs felt like lead, and he felt completely bereft of chakra… it was almost like placing a newborn in an adult's body. The helplessness he felt was almost unbearable. Not daring to voice any of this aloud – he had his pride as a man, after all – he took another sip of water, careful not to spill any down the front of his clothing. "I can barely access 1/3 of my chakra… Tsunade’s toxin did its job well…"

Sitting beside him practically radiating worried agitation, Naruto fixed him with a disapproving glare. "Y’know," she chided tersely. "This prob’ly wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t spent all night drinking… ya degenerate…"

Though he knew her reprimand was a weak attempt at disguising her concern for him - inwardly he was surprised at how quickly he was learning to read her - he fixed her with an annoyed scowl. "Hush, you!" In attempts to lighten the mood, he turned away with a dramatic sigh. "Kids these days… no respect at all…”

The blonde merely stuck out her tongue, making a loud ‘nyaaah’ sound. Shizune giggled softly.
Reminded again of her presence, Jiraiya turned serious once more. "Shizune," he murmured quietly. "The time for games is over." He met her worried gaze, his expression declaring he meant business. "What is it that Orochimaru wants from Tsunade?"

She gazed back at him, frowning in silence a few moments before finally daring to speak. "Come with me," she said softly. "I'll explain on the way."

ooo

Minutes later, the trio (along with Tonton) dashed over buildings and rooftops, exiting the town and making their way through the forest to where they now knew Tsunade was headed.

Her hands clenched tightly into fists, Shizune kept her gaze dead ahead as she explained everything that had happened during their confrontation with the Hebi Sannin. She frowned deeply as she remembered the request he had made of her mistress. "He wants her to heal his arms,"

Naruto blinked. "Heal his arms?"

Jiraiya scowled. "At the cost of his own life," he answered quietly, his mind no doubt flashing back to that day atop the Stadium. "The Sandaime sealed Orochimaru’s arms, making it impossible for him to practice any jutsu."

Blue eyes gazed at him in awe before turning ahead once more. Not only had the Sandaime resealed the Kyuubi, but he had sealed this Orochimaru-person’s arms as well? ‘Just what kinda person are we dealing with…?’ She didn’t voice the question aloud, choosing instead to utter a soft "Wow…” at the skill and strength the old man had displayed in his final moments.

So in awe was she by this new information that she almost missed that tell-tale sensation at the back of her mind before a silky voice hissed in irritation… ~ HE SHOULD HAVE KILLED THE WORM… ~ the voice snarled. ~ MERCY IS FOR THE WEAK…~

Naruto blinked again, surprised at the vehemence in the fox's tone. It certainly was being very vocal about their current situation; just what was it about Orochimaru that the demon didn't like? Before she could turn inward to question it, Jiraiya’s angry growl brought her attention back to the two adults ahead of her.

"Why?" the Toad Sage exclaimed, vaulting over a low hanging tree branch. Naruto noted the action lacked the older ninja's usual finesse. "Why would Tsunade help him? She knows what he's capable of - just as well as I do!"

"He made a deal with her," Shizune exclaimed, although the reason sounded ludicrous even to her ears. "He promised he would revive Nawaki-sama and Dan-ojisan."

Jiraiya's frown deepened even further. Their deaths affected her that deeply...?!' Tsunade's callous words and attitude came back to his mind; the way she'd spoken of the Hokage, and the disregard she'd shown Naruto... 'Tsunade... would you really forsake the village just to have them back...?' At the thought of bringing two people once lost to death back to world of the living, Jiraiya's gaze almost went to small blonde behind him before he shook the thought away. Now was not the time to contemplate such things...

Oblivous to the old ninja's thoughts, Naruto stared at the two adults ahead of her, her expression
one of incredulity. Secret deals? Bringing people back from the dead? "Are you freakin' kidding me?!" Both Jiraiya and Shizune gazed back over their shoulders at her in alarm. "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard! Does she really believe that's what they'd want?"

The brunette let out a sharp gasp, shaking her head vehemently. "Nawaki-sama and Dan-ojisan died protecting the village!" she exclaimed. "They would never allow such a thing!"

"Nor will we," Jiraiya vowed. He jumped from another tree branch, clearing the canopy in one powerful leap. 'Tsunade... if I have to kill you to protect the village...' There was a quick, sharp pain in his chest that he knew could not be attributed to his old teammate's knack for potion-making. He let out a quick breath, clenching his fists at his sides. 'Then so be it...'

Their course decided, the three ninja (along with Tonton) rushed quickly towards their destination with the hopes that they weren't already too late.

ooo

The wind snapped sharply at her clothes and hair, but Tsunade paid them no heed. Walking slowly towards the meeting place her old teammate had designated, the Slug Mistress's thoughts lay only with the final moments of her departed loved ones.

Though it was a time of war, Nawaki's death had been completely unexpected. He'd been only a genin after all - there'd really been no consideration for age in such violent times, but for someone to brutally cut down a group of children delivering messages?! It had almost been too much for her to bear... Walking into that room, spotting his body lying still beneath that awful shroud... it had been one of the most difficult things she had ever done, topped only by her having to pry their grandfather's necklace from his cold, dead fingers.

Dan's death had been more difficult simply because she had been there when it happened. The attack had come so suddenly, his injury a result of her lowering her guard only momentarily. Medic-ninja were so few after all, they couldn't afford to lose any on the field... certainly not one as skilled as she. Tsunade, the medical genius, protected from harm by the man she loved. And yet for all her skill, she had sat there, powerless to do anything as his life bled out of him. She still remembered the feel of it coating her fingers, running slick down her face as her squadmates finally dragged her away.

~ "How does it feel, I wonder..." ~ Orochimaru's words echoed loudly in her brain, mocking her, taunting her. ~ "to know that you sent two loved ones to their horrific deaths?" ~

It hurt - far more than any wound, any injury she had ever sustained. The pain never went away, no matter how deeply she tried to bury it. It always came back, clawing at her defenses, threatening to rend her heart to pieces.

~ "I can take all that fear and pain away, Tsunade..." ~ Could he really? Despite all her sensibilities, she wished more than anything for his words to be true. ~ "I can give your loved ones back to you. All I need are my arms..." ~

Of course there would have to be a catch, and such a horrible one at that. Could she really sacrifice the lives of two others just to have Nawaki and Dan back? When no answer came to mind, Jiraiya's little apprentice flashed before her mind's eye, causing her to tense in guilt and shame. Was she really that pathetic...?
"Tsunade..." The blonde kunoichi stilled, not bothering to glance over her shoulder at the dark haired ninja standing behind her. Unperturbed by her lack of greeting, Orochimaru smirked easily. "I see that you came after all." His smirk changed into a dark, pleased grin. "I trust you have come to a decision?"

Tsunade lifted her head but still did not turn to meet his gaze. "I will heal your arms, Orochimaru," she murmured quietly. "But you will leave Konoha and its people alone."

The dark haired ninja smirked once more. "I no longer have any interest in that backwater---"

"I want your word."

He fell silent a few seconds before nodding his acquiescence, "Then you have it. I will not lay a single finger on Konoha."

"Very well..." Finally she turned to face him, closing the distance between the two of them in slow strides. When she was close enough, she raised her hands to his, drawing chakra to her open palms. While her eyes studied the blue chakra concentrated in front of her, her thoughts were with Dan. His kind eyes, his gentle smile; he, too, had known the pain of losing a loved one. However, he channeled that pain into strength, vowing to protect their village with all his power. To become Hokage, to protect everyone... that had been his dream.

~ "I love this village and everyone in it. I want... to protect it." ~

'Dan...'

She could see Nawaki, too. He had been filled with such spirit, such exhuberance. His youthful naivete had always been a balm to her soul in those turbulent days. Part of her had foolishly believed that someday he would grow up to become something great.

To protect Konoha, the village founded with their grandfather's own two hands; that had been his dream.

~ "Ojii-sama founded this village and fought hard to protect everyone. I wanna be just like him and carry on his legacy..." ~

'Nawaki...'

To be so young, and yet so focused, so dedicated and devoted to a single goal...

Naruto's face flashed before her eyes once more. ~ "Hokage-jiji fought and died to protect the people of this village - people he cared for! Like family!" ~

The look in those blue eyes - so youthful like Nawaki's, but so determined like Dan's - suggested that the younger blonde would be more than willing to do the same if such a thing became necessary. How was that even possible considering what she was?

~ "I made a vow to him and myself that one day I'd become the greatest Hokage and protect everyone!" ~

It was all so familiar; she'd known even then what the girl's next words would be. She'd already heard them twice before.
The wind blew once more, and Tsunade was surprised to find tears running down her cheeks. However, she didn't falter, reaching forward with hands glowing blue chakra to grasp Orochimaru's hands within her own---

Only to be stopped by a stray kunai striking the ground at her feet.

Both ninja stilled, eyes shooting upward to the younger ninja perched in a tree above them. Kabuto's glasses glinted in the sunlight as he leapt down and landed neatly behind Orochimaru. The darker haired ninja did not look back; he stared at his still outstretched hands for several long moments before bringing his serpentine gaze up to hers once more.

"What is the meaning of this?" he hissed.

No one said anything.

"Were you really going to betray me," Yellow eyes narrowed as the bored into the blonde Sannin. "Tsunade?!"

She merely frowned at him, lowering her hands back to her sides.

He snorted in disdain. "Your silence says it all," He paused, finally tossing a glance at the younger ninja standing behind him. "It's fortunate I have Kabuto, then. He recognized your deception..." His expression shifted into a sad frown. "You truly wished to kill me, didn't you?"

"You murdered Sarutobi-sensei and countless others," she snapped tersely. "It's no less than you deserve."

Shifting on his feet, Orochimaru merely chuckled. "And now she grows a conscience." He shifted once more, fixing her with a mocking sneer. "What's wrong, Tsunade-hime? Don't you want to see Dan and Nawaki again?"

The blonde fell silent, the scowl slipping away from her face. "More than anything," she murmured quietly. "I want them in my arms so badly..." She trailed off and stared down at the ground, hugging her arms to her chest tightly. "Even after all these years... the pain I feel at their loss still hasn't gone away."

As if proving her words, images of their faces appeared before her eyes once more, causing her heart to clench painfully. She shut her eyes, trying to ignore the pain. "I love them so much," she went on mournfully. "So much that I was even willing to sacrifice two innocent people - as well as everyone else back in Konoha." Tears were running down her face once more, but she paid them no heed. Orochimaru watched them fall with a blank expression on his face, but she didn't care. She was weak, pathetic, and she knew it. "It hurts so much not having them with me... knowing I was powerless to save them..." She paused, her amber eyes opening once more. "But then I remembered..."

The dark haired ninja merely raised an eyebrow in query.

Her tears gradually slowing their descent, Tsunade slowly raised her head as she continued on, "The two of them had a dream they were willing to die to protect..." Naruto's angry, determined
face was gazing back at her now, and for once Tsunade felt as though she didn't feel the need to look away. "If I were to allow that dream to die now..." The pale, trembling hands grasping her jacket sleeves tightened their grip almost painfully. "It would be like losing them all over again..."

No one spoke for several long moments. Silence fell over the empty street like an old, heavy blanket and none of the three ninja present seemed inclined to break it.

After what seemed like an eternity, Orochimaru let out a heavy breath, fixing Tsunade with a look of disappointment. "I see..." he murmured softly. "That really is sad." Tsunade didn't respond. He shifted again, closing his eyes with a sigh. "I fear that you leave me with no choice..."

The blonde's head snapped up, her eyes hardening. In an instant the sad, bereaved woman was gone, replaced by a flash of movement, a blur of green. Neither Orochimaru nor Kabuto had time to react before being slammed into the ground a chakra trailing foot.

Kabuto touched down on a nearby stone wall, surveying the enormous crater that resided where they had once stood with wide, disbelieving eyes. 'Incredible...'

Tsunade snapped her gaze to him, her face tightening in anger. "You think you're safe from me?" she snarled. Slipping off her jacket, she charged forward once more, slamming her fist into the wall. The structure gave away instantaneously as dirt, dust, and rubble flew out in every direction.

The young ninja was able to avoid being harmed, landing safely in a tree several meters away. He glanced over at his master who was leaning casually against the trunk with an amused smirk on his face. "She's strong," he remarked calmly.

"Indeed," the Snake Master responded. His smirk widened as the blonde approached them slowly, her eyes promising pain and retribution. That was Tsunade... always quick to anger... "If she lands a hit, you're finished."

Kabuto tensed in surprise, but then recovered quickly with a smirk of his own. "Then maybe a change of scenery is necessary," he suggested.

Orochimaru chuckled lightly. "Perhaps you're right." With a quick burst of chakra, he bound off, Kabuto quick at his heels.

"Get back here!" Tsunade snarled, sprinting after them.

Her jacket, forgotten in her pursuit, drifted along with the wind briefly before landing amidst the rubble.

ooo

Naruto closed her eyes and concentrated, willing herself to the dark corner of herself she hadn't willingly ventured to since the fiasco in that border town outside of Konoha. Before long she stood within that dimly lit chamber, the large cage bars of the Kyuubi no Youko looming before her.

'Oi, Kitsune!' Gazing into the dark expanse, she was met with only silence. She merely scowled in irritation, refusing to be ignored. 'Don't pretend you don't hear me - 'cuz I know damn well that you can!'
A few moments passed in silence before there was the sound of a large body shifting slowly. Red eyes and a gaping white maw gleamed at her from the shadows as the fox spoke in a bored tone, ~ **SHOULD YOU NOT BE FOCUSING ON YOUR PURSUIT? ~**

'You think I can't think and jump at the same time?' she shot back, glaring angrily. 'I don't care about your low opinions of us humas as a whole, but don't insult me!'

The Kyuubi snorted.

'Whatever,' Naruto frowned, placing her hands on her hips. 'You an' I gotta get along if to survive - especially since we're going after this Orochimaru guy.'

At the mention of the Snake Master, the caged demon snarled ferociously, leering down at her with glowing eyes. ~ **THE WORM IS MINE TO KILL! ~**

'Yeah, sure... and how do you plan on pulling that off?' she asked sarcastically. "Cuz unless you've got a spare body layin' around in that cage of yours somewhere, you kinda need me for that.' The fox growled loudly at this, but didn't respond. 'Look, fox, I know why I'm after this guy - he killed Hokage-jiiji and threatened Konoha. But you...' She paused, quickly debating how to word her next statement. Nothing like the direct approach, right...? "You've been talkin' a lot of crap lately and it's about time you started giving me some answers.' The red eyes boring down at her turned speculative, but still the fox did not respond. 'Why are you after Orochimaru?' she insisted. 'What could a mere human have done to piss you off?'

The Kyuubi snorted loudly. ~ **IT WAS A HUMAN THAT SEALED ME WITHIN THIS HELL-HOLE. ~**

Refusing to be deterred, Naruto ignored the not-so covert insult. 'Yeah, but that was Yondaime, right?'

~ **YES. ~**

'And yet I don't hear you in the back of my head every five minutes cursing his name! So why--?'

The large, red eyes narrowed dangerously and Naruto felt her hair stand on end with the killer-intent being exuded by the demon before her. ~ **IT IS NO CONCERN OF YOURS. ~** the Kyuubi hissed in a low tone. ~ **WHEN THE TIME COMES, WE WILL KILL THIS OROCHIMARU. BE PREPARED. ~**

'Eh... wha...?' Naruto jumped, blinking in surprise as the eyes closed and vanished from her sight. 'That's it?' The demon stood, shifting back into the darkness of its cage. 'Kitsune? Oi, Kyuubi!'

Receiving only silence as a response, she turned, pulling at her hair with a growl of frustration. 'Aarrghhh! Stupid-ass fox!'

ooo

"Here it is!" Shizune landed nimbly on the corner of the stone wall, turning back to her two companions as they landed behind her. "This is where we were supposed to meet."

Jiraiya frowned slightly, surveying the damage done to the wall and street. Large craters, smoldering rubble... "Well... Tsunade was here all right..."
"Yes," the brunette agreed, her expression worried. "But she isn't here now."

"Oink! Oink!" All eyes went to Tonton, who was nosing through the rubble with an agitated expression on his face. After a few seconds his frantic digging was rewarded as he pulled out a dusty, but intact green haori, with the kanji for 'gamble' emblazoned on the back.

Shizune's eyes widened in surprise, a thousand and one scenarios already running through her mind. "It's Tsunade-sama!'"

The white haired Sannin jumped down, taking the garment in hand. There was no sign of blood or damage so far as he could see. "She must've thrown it off in the midst of her fight," he surmised. "But where did she go?" Turning to the blonde who was studying the jacket as if it would jump up and tell them the answer, he held it out to her earning a blink of surprise. "I hear you got a pretty good nose, kid," he said by way of explanation. "See if you can catch her trail."

The blonde bristled in indignation. "Do I look like a dog to you?!"

Given the way she was growling - like a canine with its hackles raised - Jiraiya was about to answer in the affirmative when he was cut off by a rather anxious looking Shizune. "Please, Naruto-kun," she entreated. "We have to hurry!"

At the older woman's pleading tone, Naruto's anger seemed to deflate. "All right," Grudgingly she took the jacket from the white haired ninja, inhaling softly to determine the scent. While she was certainly no Inuzuka, Naruto had discovered early on that she had a particularly acute nose. It hadn't truly been until meeting council woman, Iwano Miyako, that she learned how useful such a trait could be for other things than besides trying to avoid being caught after a prank. She craned her head, scenting the air. A few moments later, blue eyes locked on a path to the east. "That way."

"All right then," Jiraiya nodded, leaping away once more. "Let's go!"

Both kunoichi nodded briefly, following quickly after him.

ooo

Tsunade let out a furious yell as she rushed towards her opponent. Pulling back her fist, she prepared to deal her old teammate a crushing blow when her path was suddenly intercepted by his young assistant. "You're in my way!" she snarled.

Kabuto's glasses glinted as he held his ground. "That's the general idea!" With lightning quick movements, he raised his arm, swiping at her with a hand trailing chakra.

The kunoichi Sannin narrowly dodged, her eyes narrowing in alarm. 'This kid's better than I thought...’ As she dodge another one of his strikes, another startling thought came to her. 'He's much more skilled than even I was at his age... But who...?"

Catching her appraising look, the young ninja smirked. "When I was younger, I was discovered alone on a battlefield by a renowned medic from Konoha," he explained calmly. "He raised me as his own, and taught me everything he knew..." His smirk darkened, become almost sinister. "Little did he know how quickly I would exceed his expectations..."

A sleeper... at so young an age? The blonde kunoichi scowled. "Yet you would use medical
ninjutsu to help Orochimaru? To help him kill innocent people?"

The younger ninja paused in his attack, shrugging casually as if they were merely debating politics. "Life, death... they're both relative." He met her startled gaze, grinning. "After all, we all have to go sometime, don't we?"

"You're sick."

He shrugged again. "At least I use my skills," he shot back, all the while maintaining that same polite tone. "When's the last time you used your abilities to heal someone? When Dan died?"

Tsunade's body jerked, her amber eyes darkening in pain and anger. "Shut up!" she snarled angrily. "Don't you dare speak of him!"

Knowing he had struck a nerve, Kabuto continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Legendary Ninja, Princess Tsunade... master Slug Summoner, renowned for her skill in medicine... and yet she couldn't save the lives of those she cared for most--"

The blonde was suddenly upon him now, her fists leaving a trail of chakra behind her. "I SAID SHUT UP!!"

"And now," Kabuto continued to grin, raising his kunai. Before Tsunade could even contemplate his plan, he slashed the blade across across his hand. Red splattered across the older woman's face, halting her in her tracks. "Powerless at the sight of a little blood..."

At the sight of the enraged woman reduced to a pale, quivering mess in a matter of seconds, Orochimaru smirked in amusement.

Watching the woman trembling in fright, Kabuto shook his head, a sneer making its way across his face. "It's really pathetic," he exclaimed. "Seeing all that ability going to waste in the hands of someone like you."

Tsunade tensed, but didn't respond. So petrified was she at the dark substance covering her face that she only stood as the younger ninja regarded her with a dark smirk, and then proceeded to kick her to the ground.

Kabuto watched her skid away several feet, only to remain where she lay. Like an overbeaten dog... "Not so tough now," He glanced over his shoulder at the dark haired Sannin. "Is she, Orochimaru-sama?"

The Snake Master merely smirked.

The younger ninja turned to his 'opponent' once more, his expression shifting to one of disappointment. "All that wasted talent... You'd think she'd at least be able to save herself." When Tsunade still did not rise, he shrugged his shoulders once more. "Oh well..." He drew his kunai once more, zoning in for the kill. "So long!"

Just as he was about to close the last few feet between him and the fallen kunoichi, she vanished in a large cloud of smoke.

"What...?"
Orochimaru regarded the sudden change of events with a disapproving scowl, the expression darkening even further when the clouds dissipated only to reveal Tsunade several meters away from her original position.

Shizune set her mistress down gently, wiping the blood away with a handkerchief. "Tsunade-sama!" she called urgently. "Tsunade-sama, are you all right? Please answer me!"

The blonde merely stared straight ahead, her body still trembling harshly.

From her place behind them, Naruto regarded the older kunoichi with wide, disbelieving eyes. Was this really the same woman she'd encountered seven days ago? 'What the hell happened to her...?!'

Jiraiya frowned slightly before turning his attention back to the two ninja in the distance. "Well now," he said loudly. "Haven't you been busy... Been a long time, eh, Orochimaru...?"

The Snake Master's eyes zeroed in on him, narrowing in distaste. "Not long enough," he spat. "Jiraiya..."

Ripping her gaze from a shell-shocked Tsunade, Naruto gazed at the dark haired figure in the distance. "Orochimaru..." she growled. "This guy's the one who killed Hokage-jiji...?" Almost immediately, the same anger she'd felt before rushed to the surface. Clenching her fists at her sides, she tensed, preparing herself to...

"Stay still." Jiraiya ordered.

She blinked up at him in alarm. "Wha...?" After everything that had happened, after all that they had told her, they actually expected her not to do something? Were they serious?

Sensing her distress, Shizune shook her head briefly. "Do as he says, Naruto-kun," she said softly. "This isn't your fight."

"The hell it isn't!" she shot back. "He's gonna pay for what he's done to us!"

Shizune made to reply once more, pausing when the blonde's eyes flashed slightly. 'Did I just...?' She blinked, trying to determine whether or not it had been just a trick of the light. 'No - it couldn't have been... Right...?'

Oblivious to them, Jiraiya and Orochimaru continued their staredown, glaring at each other with all the hatred and mistrust bred over 15 years of separation.

"Well," Orochimaru sniffed in disdain. "I suppose if one of us had to stay the same after all these years, it would be you, Jiraiya. You still have a way of butting in where you are neither wanted or needed."

The Toad Sage smirked darkly. "It's all part of my charm, I suppose," he retorted. "And you're one to talk - you're still the same slimy snake you always were... You really expect me to stand by and let you have your way?"

"It would make things much simpler," the dark haired ninja answered. "But I will kill you nonetheless."

What an arrogant prick! At the threat to her would-be teacher, Naruto growled, moving forward
once more. "Why you--!"

"I wouldn't."

Blue eyes blinked, focusing in on the gray haired ninja standing a few yards away. "Who're you?"

Wire-rimmed glasses glinted in the sunlight, blocking his eyes from view. "You mean you don't remember me?" Kabuto cocked his head to the side, pouting slightly. "Why, that hurts my feelings..."

Jiraiya gazed at the boy before turning his attention to Naruto with a frown. "You two met before?"

The young blonde searched her memories before letting out a sharp 'oh!'. "I remember now!" she exclaimed. "Yakushi Kabuto - from the Chuunin Exams..." She trailed off, a frown slowly making its way to her face. "But... why are you here...?"

"Isn't obvious?" The frog hermit snorted. "He's a spy. He works for Orochimaru."

Naruto's eyes widened in shock. "No way..."

Kabuto chuckled at her expression. "Goodness, I knew you were naive, but this is just too much."

She scowled. "What are you doing?" she demanded. "You're a Konoha ninja, aren't you? Why are you workin' for a guy like him? Don't you know what he's done?!"

The older boy adjusted his glasses. "It's simple, really," he said calmly. "Just as Jiraiya-sama said, I am a spy. I infiltrated your village, learning its secrets, its weaknesses..." He smirked at the horror-struck expression. "No one suspected a thing. And would they from someone who failed the exams 7 times?"

He'd lived in their village all this time, worked amongst its people, smiled in their faces only to turn around to stab them in the backs? It was inconceivable! Blue eyes zeroed in on his hitai-ate, realizing with a jolt that the stylized leaf emblem had been replaced with that of a musical note. 'Otogakure...?" "You... you're a traitor..." she breathed, her tone still one of incredulity.

"Really..." Kabuto shook his head with a sigh. "And what of you, Uzumaki Naru?" At her confused silence, he reached into his pouch, pulling out a small card. Naruto recognized it instantly as one of the information cards he possessed during the Exams. "Age 12, Genin... 45 D Ranks, 1 C Rank turned A Rank... Taijutsu style combatant with a proclivity towards Kage Bunshin--'"

"Shut up!" Naruto snapped angrily. "Don't think having that stupid little card means you know me!"

"But I do, Naru-chan, all about you." She scowled, more at his informality than his statement. Kabuto smirked, his eyes roving her form until finally coming to a stop at her abdomen. "And what it is that lurks inside you..."

She tensed again, resisting the urge to flinch away.

Kabuto gazed at her as one might an insect beneath a glass. "The Greatest of all Bijuu... sealed inside a little blonde brat..."
Blue eyes narrowed as Naruto fixed him with an angry scowl. "What did you say...?"

The older boy merely shook his head. "You can glare at me all you want, but I'm not impressed."

He regarded the card in his hand once more. "I won't give up. I won't run away. 'Cuz that's my nindo.'" Naruto blinked at the familiar words, but the older ninja wasn't finished. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto, the future Hokage, believe it!" He shook his head in exasperation. "Despite all that power, all you do is talk, talk, talk... It's no wonder you're the last in your class..." Noting the anger radiating her trembling form, a smirk made its way across his face. "You put the Kyuubi no Youko to shame."

Naruto growled low in her throat, her eyes turning to steel as they glared furiously at the traitorous ninja.

There was a shifting in the back of her mind and suddenly she could hear the Kyuubi growling just as loudly as her. She could almost visualize those crimson eyes glowing in fury. ~ THIS BOY... ~ it hissed slowly. ~ HE DIES...~

'Finally, something we agree on!' Without warning, Naruto drew a kunai from her pouch rushed forward, intent on wiping that smug smirk from the gray haired ninja's face.

At the flash of orange, Jiraiya let out a curse of surprise. "NARUTO!"

The blonde ignored him, jumping upwards to hurl her blade at Kabuto with all her might. When the boy merely knocked it away with the use of his own weapon, she brought her hands into a familiar cross seal, letting out an angry yell of, "KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!"

Five clones appeared, and together they all rushed him head on.

Kabuto quickly dispatched each of the clones with his kunai one by one until only the original remained. However, he was completely caught off guard when she slammed into him with a club-shaped rock from behind. Staggering, he barely managed to flip out of the way of her next assault.

"Damn it!" she growled in frustration, charging after him with a powerful springing leap. 'He's a lot faster than I thought! I better slow him down if I'm gonna--' The rest of her thoughts were cut off as something wet splashed in her eyes, obscuring her vision. Letting out a startled yelp, she reared back only to be knocked off of her feet by a hard kick to the chest.

"Naruto!" Shizune gasped, rushing forward to break the girl's fall. As the blonde's body met her head on, pushing her back several feet, she focused her gaze on still wobbly Oto-nin.

Still a little disoriented from the blow to the head, as well as loss of blood from his self-inflicted wound, Kabuto could only shift his hitai-ate downwards to block the senbon the older medic ninja spat his way. 'Hnn, better be more careful...' Reaching into his pouch, he drew out a small pill.

Shizune eyed the little pellet warily. 'A blood replenishing pill...?' she mused. 'Then he's a medical ninja, like me...'

"Damn it!" Naruto growled, swiping at her eyes. "That bastard... just wait'll I...

"Please stay out of this, Naruto-kun," Shizune pleaded, wiping the young girl's eyes free of the blood Kabuto had so viciously flung at her. "I know you're strong, but that other ninja is out of your league. You must let us handle this!"
The blonde struggled against her ministrations, eager to get back on her feet once more. "I'm not just gonna stand by and--"

"You will," Jiraiya cut in sternly. "As a ninja of the Leaf, it's your duty to protect the Hokage!"

Shooting a quick glance at the other shell-shocked blonde, Naruto let out low growl to illustrate her displeasure at the arrangement.

"Shizune," The brunette turned her gaze back to Jiraiya, her dark eyes questioning. "You think you can do something about this toxin...?"

She shook her head ruefully. "It's beyond my expertise," she explained. "And Tsunade-sama is..."

The Toad Sage sighed. "Yeah, I know... Guess there's nothing for it." He gazed over at Orochimaru, scowling once more. "Well then, I'll leave 4-Eyes up to you."

She nodded resolutely, rising to her feet. "I understand."

"All right then," The white haired ninja raised his hands. "Let's get started!"

Orochimaru's eyes narrowed as the other standing Sannin began forming seals. "Kabuto!" he barked.

Instantly the younger ninja was at his side, ripping away the bandages covering one of his arms to reveal a dark, ornate looking seal. He drew a bloody finger along its length and then began forming handseals at a rapid rate.

Both signing ninja finished simultaneously, their voices echoing together across the field...

"KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU!!"

~End Chapter 27
Chapter 28a - Duty

Chapter Summary

The Legendary Three reunite. Bloodshed ensues.

Chapter 28

"KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU!!"

The open field crackled with tension as all vision was obscured behind the thick smoke that accompanied all Summoning techniques. It cleared quickly, aided by the dry wind drifting across the open plain, revealing a large two-headed snake that towered several stories into the air, its serpentine eyes glowing with murderous intent. Atop each head stood Orochimaru and Kabuto, the elder of the two grinning as if his victory was already assured.

Jiraiya fought back a grimace as the expression brought back old memories. 'Cocky bastard...'

Turning his attention back to the smoky cloud in front of him, he awaited the arrival of his own summon, his eyes widening almost comically at what stood before him.

Feeling his eyes on it, the chubby little toad turned its head, peering up at him with beady little eyes. A grin slowly spread across its amphibious little face and it raised a webbed hand in greeting. "Hallo, everybody!"

Shizune gawked, her dark eyes wide in a mixture of shock and utter embarrassment.

The Toad Sage jumped back, his face pale in disbelief. He'd known attempting a Summoning in his condition was risky, but this was just too much! "Gyyyyaaaaahhh! Gamatatsu?! Where the hell is your father?!!"

The small toad, who happened to be the Toad Boss's youngest - and least brightest - son, seemed oblivious to his incredulous exclamation as he gazed about the field in wonder. It wasn't often that he was Summoned to the human world... why was that anyway? "Wow... there sure are a lot of people here!" he commented, unaware of the twitching Sannin behind him. "Is there a party going on? Ooh - is it somebody's birthday?"

Jiraiya let out a mortified groan.

Orochimaru studied their antics in the distance, his yellow eyes near twinkling in sadistic glee. While Jiraiya had always been an abysmal failure, this little act was pathetic even for him! "I see now..." he exclaimed to himself. "His chakra has been diminished somehow..." He paused, a smirk slowly spreading across his face as it dawned on him. "It looks as though Tsunade hasn't completely lost her touch."

Atop the other serpentine head, Kabuto turned to him in curiosity. "She drugged him?" he queried. "Why?"
The Snake Master grinned. "You haven't forgotten the original terms of our agreement, have you?" he asked. "Perhaps she meant to use the fool as one of her sacrifices." At the young medic ninja's wide eyed expression, Orochimaru turned his attention back to his old teammate with a dark, mocking chuckle. "Poor Jiraiya," he intoned. "You're even more of a bumbler than you were back then."

Catching the knowing look in the other ninja's eye, Jiraiya tensed with an angry scowl. 'Damn it... he's figured it out...'

"Jiraiya-sama..." Shizune called worriedly.

He shook his head, smirking ruefully. "There's nothing we can do about it..." he interrupted. "I'll just hafta stall long enough--"

There was a sudden movement at his side as Naruto suddenly slammed her palm to the ground, letting out a short cry of "KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU!" before vanishing behind a cloud of smoke.

The smirk dropped from Orochimaru's face, replaced by stunned surprise at the sight of the blonde haired urchin performing the complex jutsu. 'The child has learned to Summon...?!!' His yellow eyes suddenly narrowed in displeasure. 'She's far more skilled than I gave her credit...'

Jiraiya stared at the spot his apprentice stood, still obscured by smoke, surprise evident on his tattooed features. 'Naruto..." he began, only to jerk in surprise once more at the sight of the jutsu's result. "Ehhh??"

A little red toad smirked up at them, raising a hand in greeting. "Yo!"

"Gamakichi-kun!" Naruto greeted.

Beady eyes landing on her, the little frog grinned mischievously. "Neechan! You keep callin' me like this and your boyfriends'll get jealous!"

The young kunoichi jerked, flushing briefly in embarrassment. "Ack! Don't you start that crap, too!" she exclaimed. Shifting slightly, she jabbed a finger at Gamatatsu, who waved once more. She was rapidly beginning to understand why Jiraiya had seemed to horrified at his sudden appearance - he didn't seem like he was the sharpest kunai in the holster... "I need you to keep that guy out of trouble!

Gamakichi followed her finger, gawking at the sight of his younger brother. His beady eyes widened in shock and horror. "Gamatatsu?" he gaped, incredulous. "Who in Kami's name let you out?"

His chubby younger sibling let out a happy giggle. "I'm here for the party, Big Brother!" he explained, as if the answer should have been obvious. "Do you know if there's gonna be food? I'm really hungry!"

"Food? Are you kidding me?"

Jiraiya regarded the two amphibians for several brief moments before letting out a sigh followed by a heavy groan. He fixed the blonde - who was still watching the two frogs with a bemused expression - with a slightly annoyed grimace. "You should've summoned the Boss, kid."
Naruto paused, shooting him a slight glare. "But you said for me to stay out of it," she muttered. He didn't need to know that she was a little wary of using the Kyuubi's chakra right now - especially with him being so uncooperative.

Unaware of her concerns, the Toad Sage's grimace soured even further. "Hey! Don't be a smartass, runt!"

"What did you call me, you dirty old pervert?"

Shizune moved herself between the pair, hoping to diffuse the situation before it got too out of hand - that is, if it hadn't already... "Ji-Jiraiya-sama... Naruto..."

Orochimaru watched the pair, his amused chuckling rousing them out of their petty squabble. "Well, well, perhaps I was mistaken..." he mused, studying the young genin once more. "The brat's his apprentice after all... Another witless fool!"

As if by some unbidden command, the summoned snake surged forward like a whip, snaking across the grass at top speed. Twin jaws unhinged, gleaming fangs glinting in the sunlight as they prepared to sink in for the kill.

"MOVE!" Jiraiya commanded, jumping upwards as one of the snake's head rammed into the ground where he had stood, sending dirt and rock everywhere.

Both kunoichi followed, darting in opposite directions.

As he was pulled to safety by his older brother, with Tonton in tow, Gamatatsu regarded the unfolding events in confusion. "What's happening, Bro? Isn't there a party? Why are we leaving?"

"So we don't get killed, that's why!" Gamakichi exclaimed, diving behind a rock several hundred yards from the battle quickly unfolding - toads could be pretty quick when the situation called for it. He gazed at the dust cloud now obscuring all but the menacing silhouette of Orochimaru's monstrosity. "You guys better be careful... Humans aren't as tough as us toads, after all!"

Beside him, Tonton let out a quiet oink of distress.

"Me, too, Pinky... me, too..."

--

'Damn it!' Shizune clutched the catatonic blonde closer to her side, her eyes stinging against grit and dust in the air. Large hunks of dirt and rock still fell from the sky, bringing visibility down to a minimum. As she leapt from stone to stone searching for a secure place to deposit her mistress, she clenched a kunai tightly in her hand. 'This is dangerous... there's no telling where--'

A surge of chakra flickered behind her and she turned, catching thick glass frames glinting in her peripheral vision. "Looking for me?"

The older kunoichi tried turning mid-air but the added weight of the limp woman threw off her balance. Kabuto didn't hesitate to take advantage of her limited mobility - raising his leg, he delivered a heavy kick to her back that sent both her and Tsunade hurtling towards the ground.
Touching down at another falling rock a few meters away, Naruto stared with wide, horrified eyes as the two kunoichi hit the unrelenting ground with a heavy thud. "SHIZUNE!" she called, only to reel back as a large snake head emerged out of the haze to her left, its gaping maw open wide.

--

Jiraiya could only watch with wide eyes as serpentine jaws clamped down on the little blonde he'd taken under his wing. He'd felt something stiffen, harden, and then shatter deep in his chest, even as he let out a loud cry of, "NARUTO!!" To his great relief, the blonde quickly re-emerged - having forced the creature's mouth open, all the while yelling obscenities. Unfortunately, the snake seemed even more displeased - what summon wants to be overpowered by a 12 year old girl - and with a powerful shake of its head, flung the girl away slamming her into the rocks below. For the briefest of moments his mind seemed to shut down, but then he was moving again, his hands rapidly forming hand signs, frantically gathering up chakra as if his - their - lives depended on it.

"Doton: YOMI NUMA!!"

Orochimaru grunted in surprise as the snake beneath him jerked, coming to a stop. Curious as to the cause, he gazed to the ground, his face twisting in anger at the soft, murky swamp that had suddenly appeared. Without solid ground to support it, the snake slowly began to sink into its depths - and though the swamp wasn't deep enough to submerge it completely - it certainly would prove to be an inconvenience.

'Damn that Jiraiya...'

The Toad Sage touched down on solid ground - or rather, the neck of one of the snakes - surveying his handiwork with a grimace of displeasure. 'Damn it... the swamp's too small...' He gaze sought out Orochimaru and his eyes hardened in angry resolve. 'Chakra or no chakra... I've gotta put an end to this fight fast...'

--

Shizune fired another volley of senbon from the small apparatus at her wrist at the traitorous nin across from her, scowling when he deflected them all with a stylized kunai. How was it that someone that gifted would willingly work for such an awful man? She just didn't understand!

'No matter...' she thought to herself, drawing chakra together for another jutsu. 'He won't be allowed to get away with what he's done.' Waiting for him to get into range, she took a deep inhalation of breath, expelling it quickly in the form of a dark, purple mist.

Kabuto skidded to a stop, his eyes widening in alarm at the thick fog lurching towards him. 'Dokugiri...poisonous mist...' Though the purple cloud lurchered harmlessly and slowly across the ground, there was no doubting its effectiveness. 'If I breathe in even a little of that stuff, I'm done for...' His body tensing as the noxious fumes closed in around him, he wracked his mind for some sort of escape.

Outside the jutsu's range, Shizune watched with anxious eyes for any sign that her attack was successful. A bead of sweat rolled down her face, and she felt a slim sliver of hope that perhaps she had been victorious... only to drop harshly to her knees, crying out at the sharp pain stabbing through her ankles. Eyes wide in horror and surprise, she stared at the glowing gloved hands jutting out of the earth beneath her feet.
She stared as Kabuto rose out of the ground, that same knowing smirk still prevalent on his face. She barely had any time to react before he was in her face, his fist pulled back to deliver another crushing blow.

Tsunade watched her assistant hit the unyielding ground before her, her body trembling even more harshly at the blood on the younger woman's chin. She was hurt, as was Jiraiya's little apprentice - she had watched as she too hit the ground after escaping the snake's clutches, though she had yet to get up. They both needed her help, she knew this, but she couldn't bring herself to move. They were right there in front of her, well within her power to reach, but all she could see were the ghosts of loved ones past. Nawaki... Dan... they had both laid there helpless, too...

"No... no... no..." Her limbs shaking even harder, she clutched her arms tightly around her body, freezing in terror when she sensed another presence behind her. Reacting on primal instinct alone, she spun around and slapped his hand away with a loud, hysterical shriek. "Stay away from me!"

Kabuto stared down at her, his expression a mixture of surprise and mild disgust. "Are you finished yet?" The older blonde didn't answer, slowly crawling backwards away from him like a cornered animal. His lip curled into a sneer at the sight. "How pathetic can you get? One of the Legendary Three reduced to such a state..." Closing his eyes, he let out a resigned sigh. Opening them again, he clenched his hand into a fist once more. "I suppose then its up to me to put you out of your misery!"

"Leave her alone."

The gray haired medic ninja started in surprise, turning to face the smaller blonde holding his wrist in a tight grip. Meeting her steel blue eyes, he fixed his expression into a pleased grin. "Still alive, huh? Impressive."

Naruto's expression didn't waiver. "I'm not about to let you hurt the old lady," she hissed. "So back off and fight me instead!"

Deep within the recesses of her mind, the Kyuubi hissed his displeasure at her sudden decision. ~ WHY DEFEND HER? ~ it scowled. ~ SHE SOUGHT TO AIDE OUR ENEMY! ~

'Shut up, Fox,' she thought back with a snarl. 'Nobody asked you.'

Whether it was annoyed or taken aback at her vehemence, the demon quickly fell silent once more.

Oblivious to her brief inner debate, Kabuto studied the little Leaf Genin, carefully taking in everything about her - her stance, her appearance, her grip on his wrist, everything. Had not she been so insistent on keeping him away from Tsunade, Naruto would have yanked her hand away faster than you can say 'Kuchiyose'. It was just downright creepy! Just what was it he found so fascinating about her anyway?

Finally his knowing smirk melted away, replaced by a dangerous scowl. "I told you before to stay out of it..." he warned in a low tone. Naruto didn't flinch. "A little kid like you should know better than to meddle in the affairs of adults."

That did it. "Shut the hell up!" Naruto tensed her body, pulling her free hand back into a fist, preparing to ram it into his face.
Anticipating the move, Kabuto pulled his own captured wrist forward, throwing off the blonde's balance. As she stumbled by him, he swept one of her legs out from under her, tapping her thigh with a chakra charged hand. When she hit the ground, letting out a short hiss of pain, Kabuto shook his head, clicking his tongue in mock sympathy. "You poor thing... having a bit of a hard time, aren't you?"

The kunoichi scowled back him, biting back a curse when she was unable to rise to her feet.

"I noticed you favoring one leg while you were standing in front of me just now," Kabuto explained. "You must've injured it in that fall with the snake... possibly a minor fracture?" He paused, the annoying smirk returning to his face once more. "It wouldn't have become an issue if not for the fact that I severed the muscle connecting to that particular bone in your leg."

It was possible to do that with chakra? Refusing to be intimidated, Naruto fixed an angry scowl to her face. "Think whatever you want, asshole," she spat. "I'm not done with you, you traitor! Not by a long shot!"

The older ninja merely laughed. "You think that face is supposed to scare me? How juvenile..." His expression turned cocky once more. "Only little kids like you rely on ridiculous notions like hope."

Behind them, Tsunade's body twitched involuntarily.

"'I don't give up,'" he continued in a mocking tone. "'I don't run away'... It's petty idealisms like that that'll get you killed in the real world!"

Tsunade listened to his words, her mind inevitably shifting back to moments in her past shared with her little brother. After all, how many times had she lectured him about the dangers of war and the necessity of acting responsibly?

~ "If there's a fight, Nawaki, you better run away as fast as you can." ~

~ "What?!" ~ Brown eyes would always glare right back at her, and her Nawaki would loudly exclaim, ~ "No way! I'm a ninja of the Leaf! I'm never gonna run away!" ~

It was all still too fresh, too familiar in her heart and mind. Seeing the little blonde in front of her now reminded her so much of Nawaki... and it hurt far more than she could have possibly imagined.

Oblivious to her turmoil, Kabuto continued his mocking tirade. The whole while, the smaller blonde's eyes followed him, putting Tsunade in mind of a wild, cornered dog.

'Or a fox...' her feverish mind supplied. The Slug Mistress found the manic attempt at humor made her feel ill.

"Hopes and dreams are a waste of time!" Kabuto spat, as if merely speaking of the concepts were distasteful to him. "You keep pining away over silly things like that and you'll never become a real ninja!"

In a blur of movement, Kabuto took a swipe at Naruto with his kunai, causing a sharp stab of worry to slip through Tsunade's chest. "NARUTO!!!
The blonde shifted her gaze briefly, her eyes registering confusion at the sudden show of concern before turning her attention back to her opponent just in time to block his kunai with the use of her Chakra shield. Pushing back against him, she summoned all her willpower, ignoring the sharp stabbing pain in her leg as she rose to her feet once more. "I don't know where you get your information from, Four Eyes," she grunted. "But I AM a real ninja! And I'm gonna be Hokage someday!" She pulled her free hand back, willing her chakra from her reserves to pool together in the palm of her hand. She knew she was taking a risk, but at the moment there was no other choice. 'Rasengan... here we go!'

Tsunade’s amber eyes widened in surprise at the sight of the bright, blue chakra coalescing in the young girl's palm. 'No way...' she awed, remembering a similar sight during their brief fight outside of the bar. 'Is it actually possible...?'

Naruto surged forward, aiming the wildly spinning orb directly towards the Sound ninja with an angry yell of, "RASENGAN!!"

Quick to act, Kabuto jumped back and narrowly avoided the blow, his keen eyes warily studying the chakra slowly dissipating into nothingness. 'What was that...?' He frowned, recalling nothing like that in the dossier of information he'd collected on her. 'Is it possible that she's learned a new attack...?'

Frustrated that her attack had failed - once again she hadn't been able to maintain her chakra long enough to score a hit - Naruto spun around with a kunai in hand, prepared to deliver another strike. The older ninja stayed where he was, regarding her with an amused expression. "What was that?" he asked with a chuckle. "How do you expect to beat me with such a useless technique? You can't even hold it together long enough to hit me with it!"

Scowling quietly at the truth in his words, Naruto stared down at her empty hand with a grimace. 'Damn it, he's right...' she told herself, loathe as she was to admit it. 'So I can't pull off a one-handed Rasengan like the old perv...' Glancing back up once more, she fixed her narrowed gaze on him, weighing her options. 'He's stronger than I am... and he's got that weird glowing chakra trick...' Remembering the number he had done on her injured leg, Naruto was glad the Kyuubi was still healing her wounds despite his pissy attitude. If they made it out of this mess in one piece, the pair of them were waaay past due for a long talk. 'If he manages to take out even one of my arms...'

As if he could read her thoughts, the older ninja shifted his weight, his lips curled back in a cruel smirk. Refusing to back down but wary of any sudden attacks, Naruto moved as well, placing herself between him and the still shell-shocked Slug Mistress.

"Why are you wasting your time trying to protect her?" he asked her, chuckling at the ridiculousness of the situation. What did she really expect to accomplish anyway? "I hope you're not expecting her to heal you once I'm through with you-- that is..." He paused, a dark look passing over his features that had an involuntary chill running up the Leaf genin's spine. "If I don't just kill you first."

"You're not killing anybody!" she snapped back, tightening her grip on her kunai. "I'll make sure of that!"

He wasn't phased in the least. "Why bother? What's the point?"
Tsunade stared at the orange clad back before her, the same questions echoing loudly in her mind. The blonde really had nothing to gain by helping her, but so much to lose! The harsh words she had spoken to her back at the bar bubbled to the surface, leaving a sick feeling in her stomach.

~ "Hell, why stick your nck out at all? It's not worth it!" ~

Every bitter word she'd spoken that day had been designed to wound her sharper than any kunai. Looking back now Tsunade realized she had wanted to break her, she had wanted to crush that bright, shining spirit that had been burning so brightly in front of her. Naruto had to have been aware of this; the anger that had radiated her tiny form had been obvious for everyone to see. Hell, she'd had no reseverations of letting her know exactly what she thought about her. So then why? Why would she put her life at risk for someone she obviously thought so little of?

Unaware of her inner turmoil, Naruto straightened her spine, gazing back at Kabuto with cool blue eyes of steel. "The point?" she murmured, her voice sharp despite its low tone. "The point is I'm a ninja of Konohagakure no Sato... and it's my duty to protect the Hokage!"

Tsunade let out a sharp gasp.

Kabuto snorted. "Hokage... her? Konoha's as good as finished!"

"Like hell is is!" Naruto snapped back. "I'll make sure she keeps it in line! After all, she'll be keeping my spot warm for me!"

The Slug Sannin watched with an awestruck expression as the two young ninja rushed towards each other once more, carrying on their battle with equal fervor to the other two Sannin some distance.

'Shizune... Jiraiya... Naruto...' All three were doing everything in their power to protect her, the bitter drunk gambler that couldn't even stomach the sight of blood. And they wanted to make *her* Hokage?! 'I don't understand... Why put yourself at risk for me...?' She watched with terrified eyes as the young blonde was knocked back a kick from the elder ninja, skidding in the dirt before regaining her bearings once more. "Why?"

Kunai raised, Naruto kept her gaze on Kabuto, her breath coming out in ragged gasps. The older boy merely gazed back at her like a large cat waiting for its prey to give up the chase. Naruto inwardly scowled at the thought - she wasn't about to give up! That was her nindo! "Someone once told me..." she murmured, feeling Tsunade's amber eyes boring into her back. "People discover true strength when they're fighting to protect someone else..."

Noble sentiments... especially from one so young. "But you could die..." she breathed out.

Naruto's eyes darkened slightly. "He died... protecting his precious person... and I blamed myself until I realized I was dishonoring his sacrifice."

"Sacrifice...?"

The blonde word's from the bar replayed in her ears once more. ~ "Hokage-jiji fought and died to protect the people in the village - people he care for! Like family!" ~

~ "I made a vow to him and myself... That one day I'd become the Greatest Hokage, and protect
'Dreams...' Tsunade was suddenly roused out of her thoughts by a yell from Kabuto. Amber eyes shot up as the Oto-nin charged towards the blonde, both his hand and kunai charged with lethal, glowing chakra. "Naruto!" The blonde ignored her, meeting him head on with her Chakra Spade. "Stop it! You don't have to do this!"

Naruto let out a snort, pushing against Kabuto's weight despite her small stature. "You better get that necklace ready, old lady..." she grunted. "'Cuz I'm about to win that bet!"

Fed up with her incredulously optimistic outlook on the outcome of their battle, Kabuto let out an uncharacteristic snarl of rage, pulling back his one of his hands. Reaching into his own weapons pouch, he pulled out another kunai, preparing to go for her unprotected side. "DIE!!"

Tsunade's eyes widened in terror. "Nooo!!!"

Unperturbed by the danger, Naruto met the older boy head on. Knocking the kunai out of his right hand with her Chakra Spade - who knew it could be used offensively? - she grasped his clasped hand with her other free one, not even flinching as the blade bit into the flesh between her fingers. At his stunned expression, she let out a victorious smirk, refusing to loosen her grip.

"What?!!"

Eyes gleaming fiercely, Naruto let out a snort. "Talk, talk, talk... don't you have anything better to do?" she asked mockingly. "The Fox an' I are tired of listening to your crap!"

The medic ninja tensed, struggling to release his hand from the young girl's vice like grip. "Let go of my hand!" he snarled.

"Why should I?" she shot back. "You're not afraid of a little kid like me, are you?" As if that were its cue, a Kage Bunshin emerged from the dirt to the left of Naruto, gazing back at him with an identical smirk. "How 'bout two of us?"

'A shadow clone?!' Kabuto stared at the two blonde's, a thunderstruck expression on his face. 'When did she have time to--?" He paused, remembering the first time she had charged him with five clones. He thought he had destroyed them all... 'She managed to keep one hidden after all this time...?!' "What are you--?"

Naruto ignored him, giving a nod to her clone. Wasting no time, the clone began channeling chakra into the original's upturned palm, compressing it, moulding it until once again took on the shape of a spinning blue orb. "All right, Kabuto," Blue eyes focused on him, narrowing in a way that promised nothing but pain. "I'm gonna show you what a genin like me can do!"

Staring at the swirling orb in her hands, Kabuto once again began struggling to free his hand. 'That same attack...? A bead of sweat ran down his face as he studied it more closely. The orb was brighter, the chakra spinning round and round more quickly... 'No... it's different this time...'

'Ooh my God...' Tsunade watched with wide eyes, barely able to believe what she was seeing. 'It really is--!'

The blonde's hand shot forward in a blur, her upturned palm slamming into the spy's chest with a force of a hurricane. "RASENGAN!!"
Kabuto's world exploded in a flash of energy, his screams echoing loudly across the field. The force of the blonde's jutsu knocked him backwards, his body spinning wildly until he collided harshly with a large boulder.

--

At the sudden surge of chakra, both Jiraiya and Orochimaru ceased their assaults, staring in mute shock as Kabuto was flung several hundred yards away.

'She did it...' Jiraiya thought to himself, warring between feelings of shock and pride. 'She actually did it...!'"'

Orochimaru's yellow eyes were wide in disbelief. Could that scrawny little urchin have actually... "Impossible!"

His old teammate turned back to him, a knowing smirk slowly spreading across his face. "What did I tell you?" he chuckled, ignoring the Snake Sannin's angry scowl. "It takes guts to be a good ninja... and that kid's got it in spades!"

~ End Chapter 28a
Chapter 28b - One More Time

Chapter Summary

"One more time... I'll dare to dream, too... Just one more time..."

Chapter 28b

Tsunade sat in stunned silence, still trying to wrap her mind around what she had just seen. 'I...'
The image kept playing over and over in her mind. 'I don't believe it...' She lifted her head,focusing her gaze on the prone figure in the distance. "Naruto... I can't believe you actually--" The rest of her words died in her throat as Kabuto let out a low groan, rising unsteadily to his feet. "What?! That's impossible!"

Taking in her stunned expression through cracked lenses, Kabuto let out a raspy, wheezing chuckle. "Did I forget to mention that I have the ability to regenerate my body from a cellular level?" At her short gasp, he smirked. "It's one of the reasons Orochimaru-sama finds me so useful. The moment her attack struck my body, I was already focusing my chakra at the impact site, replacing the old cells with new ones to prepare the damage."

Struggling to regain her composure, Tsunade bit her lip, scowling inwardly. 'Damn it... just what is this kid...? He's even better than I was at my prime!' A strangled whimper reached her ears and the kunoichi snapped her head towards her fellow blonde.

Naruto was breathing heavily, swaying on her feet as if staying upright took a conscious effort. Before Tsunade could even ask what was wrong, the young girl let out a sharp gasp and hunched forward as a fit of coughing shook her body. Bringing a hand to her mouth, pale blue eyes widened at the sight of blood coating her trembling fingers.

Tsunade noticed it as well, but before she could make mention of it, the young girl pitched forward, crumpling to the ground like a deck of cards. "NARUTO!" She was on her feet in an instant, closing the distance between them. Years of instinct and training took over as she reached down to check the girl's pulse. Placing an ear to her chest, her eyes widened in alarm at what she found. 'Her heartbeat... It's slowing down!' Another raspy chuckle drew her eyes to Kabuto once more. "This is your doing?"

Kabuto smirked. "I already told you," he said simply. "I began healing the damage from Naru-chan's little attack the moment it hit me..." He paused, his smirk turning dark. "And with her so close I figured I may as well return the favor..."

Tsunade's attention turned back to Naruto as she let out another gurgled cough, bright flecks of red spattering against her pale lips.

"She took quite a gamble...and lost..." He let out a sigh of mock-sympathy. "I cut off the paths of chakra leading to her heart - effectively blocking off her oxygen and blood flow..." His smirk turned sinister as he gazed down at the two pale blondes. "And there's no way the Fox can help her in time..."
Amber eyes stared up at him in disgust and terror. "You're a monster..."

"Petty words..." he snorted, slowly closing the distance between them. "I warned her against using such a technique... My ability allows me to recover from anything she or you throw at me..." He drew another kunai from his pouch, brandishing it menacingly. "That is, if you're guts enough to--" The rest of Kabuto's words were cut off by a strangled gurgle, and hiss eyes widened as his body began to shut down. 'What?! Impossible...?!' He tried to draw chakra from his reserves to continue repairing the damage done, only to find that his body had none to spare. 'Was that attack was too much for my body to handle...?" He took another step forward, only to drop limply to the ground. "Damn it!"

--

Safely observing the fight from a distance, Gamatatsu watched as the man in glasses fell to the ground, letting out a happy cheer. "Yaayy! Bad Glasses man is down again!"

"Yeah," Gamakichi agreed, his beady eyes focused on the unmoving blonde in orange. "But so's Neechan..."

Beside him, Tonton let out a worried oink.

--

A frown marring her deceptively youthful face, Tsunade quickly unzipped Naruto's jacket to better survey the damage wrought by Kabuto's assault. Spotting a turquoise, spiral-shaped pendant hanging loosely form her neck, the blonde medic-nin was once again reminded of Jiraiya's words - had it only been yesterday...?

~ "She would have only lost one instead of both..." ~

Shaking her head to rid her mind of any more dark thoughts, Tsunade forced herself back to the task at hand. "C'mon... get a hold of yourself!" Wasting no more time, she quickly formed a chakra scalpel to cut away the durable material that made up the black Kevlar-like vest she wore. After that, she quickly ran through a rapid series of hand signs, summoning glowing green chakra to her hands.

A short laugh from Kabuto halted her movements momentarily. "You're wasting your time..." he rasped. "There's no way... you can undo the damage in time... Naru-chan's as good dead--"

"Shut the hell up!" she snarled, turning to him with a hate-filled glare. "If she dies, you'll be next... I'll see to that, make no mistake!" Ignoring his stunned expression, she turned her attention back to the blonde beneath her. 'Please...' Laying her hand hesitantly against the younger blonde's chest chest, she watched as the green chakra slowly seeped into her body. Gazing at her still form, she could still see Dan and Nawaki laying beside her, their faces still in death. She didn't... she didn't want that for her! 'Please... don't die... don't die... don't die...' Tears began running down her cheeks, splattering harmlessly against the black spiral seal standing out sharply against the young girl's skin. 'Don't die...!'

--

He stared at the dimly lit cage sealing him, his deceptively human brow creasing at the inky
blackness slowly creeping towards him. It closed in on all sides, threatening to devour everything. Needless to say he was not pleased.

~ WHAT IS THIS...? ~ he hissed. ~ WHY IS IT GETTING DARK...? ~ Stretching out his senses that linked him to his tenant, he was vaguely alarmed to find that her spark, her life was slowly fading... flickering sporadically like a tiny candle on a windy day. He quickly became enraged that he, the Kyuubi no Youko, had been forced into such a situation. More than anything he wanted to destroy the humans that had doomed him to such a pathetic fate! ~ WHELP! ~ The indignant anger he felt diminished slightly when his taunt received no response. The little creature hated any slight against her small stature - why would she not answer? His humanoid expression fixed into a furious scowl. ~ HEAR ME, LITTLE WHELP! YOU ARE NOT PERMITTED TO EXPIRE UNTIL I SAY SO! ~ The darkness seeped past the bars of his cage, creeping up his legs with a cold, numb sensation that the demon disliked immensely. Still, there was no answer. ~ WHELP! WHELP...! ~ He was almost completely surrounded now - surely the greatest of all Bijuu could not meet its end this way! ~ DON'T DIE-- ~

There was a tense moment of stillness that was quickly shattered by a loud echoing, dripping sound. Was it water? A tear...? The darkness that had threatened to consume everything rippled outwards, only to vanish like mist. Immediately he stretched his senses out once more, his crimson eyes widening at the presence of outside chakra seeping into his tenant's body.

--

Tsunade's vision blurred with tears but she kept her gaze on the blonde laying beneath her, wishing, hoping, and praying with every breath in her that those bright blue eyes would open. She couldn't allow her to die - not after everything that had happened! "Naruto..." She leaned down towards her, vaguely aware of her pendant hanging loosely around her neck - the same pendant the little kunoichi had vowed to win. "Please..."

A small, bloodied hand reached up, slowly grasping hold of the glittering green stone hanging suspended in the air. The blonde ninja let out a short gasp, meeting the weary, lidded gaze of Jiraiya's latest apprentice. "Naruto...?"

The younger blonde grinned up at her with bleary blue eyes. "The name's... Naru, Obaachan..." Her grin widened just slightly. "And I won your bet... just like I said... I would..." Her energy spent, Naruto's eyes slowly drifted shut and her grip went slack.

Catching her injured hand before it hit the ground, Tsunade summoned up another round of healing chakra, closing up the wound from Kabuto's kunai. "That's right... you did..." she murmured quietly. "And so much more..." Gazing down at her unconscious form with a tender smile, Tsunade could see Dan and Nawaki once more. Hesitating only a moment, she reached up to her neck, unfastening her prized necklace. Lifting the blonde's head gently, she placed it reverently around her neck. "One more time..." Zipping up her jacket to protect her modesty, the medic let out a heavy breath. "I'll dare to dream, too... Just one more time..."

--

As Orochimaru dodged Jiraiya's most recent attack, he spotted the two blondes in the distance, a frown making its way to his face. While he hadn't spotted the move Kabuto had made during Naruto's attack, he had watched her hit the ground, sensing her vitals dropping to dangerous levels. It had irked him to no end to learn that the little brat was capable of such a complex and
powerful technique, but he had felt a bit of satisfaction seeing the toll the result had taken on her body. However, glancing at the pair of blondes in the distance, he was even more than a little upset to learn that the little orange-clad genin was still alive!

'That little fool houses the Kyuubi no Youko,' the pale Snake Master reminded himself. A stray thought entered his mind, transforming his frown into an all-out scowl. 'If that child were to learn to truly harness that power... it would make things difficult for me...' His mind went back to years ago and the great and terrible thing he had done... 'Perhaps it was a mistake to leave things for Akatsuki to handle...' Knowing that he felt no regret for his actions, a smirk made its way across his face once more. 'Perhaps I'll save them the trouble and kill the brat now!'

Jiraiya let out a sharp gasp of surprise as Orochimaru suddenly broke away from him, diving off towards the ground below with his Kusanagi in tow. Following his trajectory, the white haired Sannin eyes widened in horror. 'Shit! He's after Naru!' Wasting no time, he jumped down after him in pursuit. Unfortunately, as if he had predicted such an action, Orochimaru turned his head his way, shooting out his serpentine tongue towards him. "What the--?!" Still in a free fall, Jiraiya had no time to evade as it latched around his ankle, yanking him down in the harsh, unyielding ground. The air forcefully knocked out of his lungs, Jiraiya let out a low groan and quickly succumbed to unconsciousness.

Sensing the oncoming threat, Tsunade snapped her head up, amber eyes zeroing in on the sword-wielding ninja zooming towards them. Realizing his intended target, she surged forward, shielding the small girl's body with her own. "No, I won't let you!"

Even as the wicked blade slipped neatly between her ribs, Tsunade had only one thought. 'No matter what... I will not let her die...' --

Orochimaru stared at his old teammate with wide disbelieving eyes. "Tsunade..." he murmured softly. "You were the one I wanted to spare..."

She let out a grunt, glaring up at him with harsh eyes filled with anger and pain. "Spare me your crap..." she spat out, heedless of the blood running over her bottom lip. "Your apologies don't mean anything to me..."

In the distance, Shizune slowly fought her way back to consciousness. Forcing herself into a sitting position, the first thing she saw - namely her mistress impaled upon an S-Rank criminal's sword - had her crying out in horror. "Tsunade-sama! Nooo!"

Shizune's agonized cry jerked Jiraiya's pain-wracked body into wakefulness, his eyes immediately searching out the woman in question. Watching the red fluid spurting out of her back, Jiraiya's heart shattered - his soul reeling with the fact that he had failed once again.

"TSUNADE!!" --

Drawing his blade back into his throat, the only remaining Sannin took a step back, frowning over the woman's ridiculous action. "You're a fool, Tsunade!" he spat out in disdain. "Why would you throw away your life for this pathetic little creature? I expected you to have more sense than that!"
Tsunade tensed, hearing her own words echoing his.

~ "And look where it got him... Throwing his life away like that... the old man, too... I would've thought he'd know better..." ~

~ "Hell, why stick your neck out at all? It's not worth it. The only thing I'm willing to risk is my money... Anything else is for suckers..." ~

"Such a useless sacrifice," Orochimaru went on. "You, once a renowned medical genius, now a bitter lush of a woman who cowers at the sight of a single drop of blood..." Staring down his nose at her, he let out a derisive laugh. "What did you expect to accomplish?"

~ "You're too naive, kid. You can't always just jump in and save the day." ~

~ "Why bother? What's the point?" ~

~ "The point is I'm a ninja of Konohagakure no Sato... and it's my duty to protect the Hokage!" ~

Tsunade gazed at the blonde, once again marveling at the monumental strength she possessed regardless of her age. Reaching down to touch her face - as if somehow touching her would be proof enough that such an amazing child truly existed - Tsunade paused at the sight of the glinting metal of a sword arcing towards them once more. Without hesitating, the Slug Mistress shielded the unconscious girl, allowing the Kusanagi to rake across her back instead.

Surprised that she would be willing and able to repeat her previous actions, Orochimaru let out a grunt of surprise. "What *are* you doing?!"

His old teammate glared up at him with amber eyes of fury. "I'm protecting the future of Konohagakure no Sato..." she answered in a low tone. "This is my sworn and sacred duty... as Godaime Hokage!"

"What?!" Before he could even dispute her decision, the dark haired ninja was suddenly rocked backwards by a fist slamming into his face. 'Impossible!' he thought as his body hurtled backwards. 'Her phobia... her injuries... how did she overcome them so quickly?!'

Rising slowly to her feet, Tsunade regarded her old teammate with a look of utter contempt. "I've had enough of your crap, Orochimaru..." she snarled. "It's time to put a stop to you once and for all!"

Orochimaru hissed at her in annoyance. "You really believe you can beat me in such a state?"

"You mean these scratches?" she snorted. "These can easily be remedied."

Watching her mistress with anxious eyes, Shizune watched the blonde draw her fingers to the wound at her chest, her mind instantly realizing what it is she intended to do. 'No... anything but that jutsu!' "Tsunade-sama, wait!" she called out. "Allow me to heal your injuries for you!"

Tsunade ignored her, her hands already flying through a rapid series of seals. Suddenly, the light blue tattoo on her forehead began glowing with chakra. The seal began glowing brighter and brighter until an intricate black seal spread across her brow.

Pale yellow eyes narrowed in suspicion at the unfamiliar technique. "What is that?"
The blonde smirked back at him. "\textit{Ninpou: Sozo Saisei, Genesis Rebirth.}" she answered calmly. "I've been gathering chakra in this seal in this seal of mine for quite some time. Once activated, this jutsu releases that chakra, not only increasing my strength, but healing any and all injuries I sustain during a fight..." As she spoke, the wounds she had received from his blade rapidly began closing up. "In other words," Her eyes gleamed with the promise of violence. "I will never die in battle."

\textit{That's not entirely true...} Shizune thought to herself, trembling with worry. "\textit{Sozo Saisei accelerates the generation of cells in her body, rapidly increasing the healing process, it's true... But the body can only replicate its cells a limited number of times...} She paused, swallowing in apprehension. "It makes her invulnerable for a time... but in reality she's actually shortening her life each time she uses it!"

Slowly dragging himself to his feet, Jiraiya studied his old teammate, his expression one of awe. "\textit{Tsunade...}"

Orochimaru studied the pair, his expression one of disgust. "As if the two of you could ever hope to defeat me!"

"Trust me," Tsunade dragged a finger across her bloody lip, running it across her palm. "I'm gonna do more than that."

Recognizing her actions from his prone position several yards away, Kabuto called out to warn his master. "Orochimaru-sama! Manda!"

Quick to act, the Snake Master leapt backwards to his side, holding out one his blackened arms bearing a dark seal. "Do it!" he commanded.

"Damn it!" Jiraiya also nicked his finger, running through the necessary signs as quickly as his hands would allow.

Simultaneously, three hands slammed into the earth, chakra washing across the field like a pulse wave at the same time of a unison cry of, \textit{KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU!!}"

Smoke exploded across the field, and when it dispersed there stood three of the large Summons, Boss Summons Gamatatsu, Katsuyu, and Manda. Atop each head stood a member of the Legendary Three, eyes hard and body tense for the upcoming battle.

"\textit{Orochimaru and Manda, Tsunade and Katsuyu...}" Gamabunta took a drag from his ever-present pipe, regarding the other two Summons with a casual expression. "\textit{Eh...? What's this, a reunion?}"

Jiraiya gave a humorless chuckle. "Yeah... the gang's all here..."

Shizune worked quickly healing the damage done to her ankles by Kabuto's underhanded attack, and once finished, jumped to her feet to assist her mistress in battle. However, she barely made it a few feet when a miniature clone of Katsuyu landed before her, blocking her path.

"Katsuyu-sama!" she exclaimed. "I have to help Tsunade-sama!"
"Shizune," the white slug exclaimed gently. "Your mistress has another task for you." Twisting her body just slightly, Shizune let out a gasp as she realized the clone was carrying a passenger.

"Naruto-kun!" She quickly took the unconscious girl into her arms, marveling briefly at just how small she actually was. All that strength and power and yet she was light as a feather! "What happened to her?"

"She is recovering from injuries sustained in battle," the Katsuyu-clone explained. "However, she will be fine. Tsunade-sama requests that you keep her safe until the fight is over."

Although part of her felt slighted at being sent to the sidelines, the medic in Shizune knew how important it was that she stay with Naruto. Although Tsunade had healed a majority of the damage from what she could tell, the battlefield was still no place for the young genin in her condition. It was up to her to keep her safe. Meeting the summon's pale eyes, Shizune gave her a solemn nod. "I understand."

Satisfied its task was complete, the slug-clone gave her a brief nod before vanishing in a poof of smoke.

Securing her hold on the blonde in her arms, Shizune gazed out at the three giant creatures in the distance. Three Boss Summons, called forth the do battle at the will of the Densetsu no Sannin. She had no place in battle like this and she knew it. But still...

'Tsunade-sama... Jiraiya-sama... please be careful... Konoha still needs you both...' She gazed briefly down at the little blonde in her arms. 'And you as well...'

--

Manda, Boss of the Snakes, regarded the situation with anger and disgust. His serpentine eyes immediately went upwards to the foolish mortal whom had dared to summon him to this dirt field. "Orochimaru," he hissed furiously. "Why did you summon me here? I don't appreciate having my time wasted over such trivial matters!"

Kneeling at his master's feet, Kabuto gazed at the giant serpent entreatingly. "Please, Manda-sama," he pleaded. "I assure you it will be worth the trouble--"

One large eye narrowed in displeasure. "Was I talking to you?" the snake spat. "Puny worms - I should devour you both!"

The young ninja recoiled, struggling to maintain his composure. 'This is bad...' he thought to himself. 'Summoning Manda was a mistake... He doesn't listen to anyone and only acknowledges those with strength...' He gazed at the Sannin beside him, trained eyes studying the limp, discolored arms hanging uselessly at his sides. 'If he learns of Orochimaru-sama's condition, he'll turn on us for certain!'

"Well, Orochimaru? When this is over I want 50 -- 100 sacrifices! Got that!"

The Snake Master paused briefly before allowing a dark smirk to spread across his face. "Very well." With that he turned his attention back his two old companions. "My, my... to have all three of us together again like this... It makes me sick."
Tsunade snarled. "Well rest easy, Snake... you won't be amongst us for long..." She scowled across the distance, cracking her knuckles menacingly. "Hell, you won't even be amongst the living!"

He scoffed back in response. "Why would I want to be... when I can become so much more!"

Needing no signal from his Summoner, Manda surged forward like a bolt of lightning, his dark serpentine eyes glittering madly with the promise of bloodshed.

The Slug Sannin tensed her body, bracing herself for battle. "Get ready, Katsuyu!" she called out.

"Yes!"

"Stand down, Tsunade!" Jiraiya yelled out. "We've got this!" He glanced down quickly, meeting the old frog's eye. "Boss! I need oil!"

"You got it!" Expanding his cheeks almost comically, the giant amphibian spewed out a thick jet of crude, black oil.

Wasting no time, Jiraiya was zipping through seals once more before bringing a hand to his mouth in the sign of the Tiger. "Katon: GAMAYU ENDAN!"

The fires of Jiraiya's attack quickly fed off the Toad Boss' oil, shooting towards the charging snake with deadly accuracy. The open field shook with the resounding explosion, and the two remaining ninja watched as the giant snake vanished within a plume of flame.

Jiraiya stared intently at the receding flames, a scowl making its way across his tattooed face at the sight of the blackened, charred remains left behind. 'That sneaky bastard...' "He shed his skin and used it as a Kawarimi!"

"Damn it!" Tsunade quickly scanned the open field, amber eyes searching for any sign of their opponents. "Where is he?!" Suddenly, the ground beneath her began to tremble and she let out another curse of alarm. "Below us!"

Gamabunta lurched forward, drawing his tanto from its sheath. "I'm on it!" Stopping directly over the spot where he was certain the snake would soon show its ugly head, the old toad grunted in surprise as a barbed tail shot out of the dirt, slapping his blade away. "Blast - another decoy!"

"Get ready, Tsunade!"

With Jiraiya's call as their only warning, the blonde cursed in surprise as Manda once again emerged from the earth - head first this time - his sights set on ripping them two shreds.

"Ready, Katsuyu...?" she asked. The slug beneath her tensed in preparation. "Wait for it..."

Manda continued his charge, unhinging his jaw to reveal long, sinister fangs dripping with venom. Waiting until he was in range, Katsuyu lifted her head, spitting hissing green acid in his direction. Unfortunately the snake anticipated the move and dodged at the last possible moment, using her surprise to wrap his body around her. Letting out a snorting hiss at his success, he clenched his muscles, preparing to squeeze the life out of his victim - much like he would any of his prey.
"Katsuyu!" Tsunade cried out, staring down at her partner in worry.

The Slug Boss struggled a few moments to free herself but soon realized the effort was in vain. Expanding her body as far as she could, given its restrictions, she burst apart in the version of mini clones of herself, easily slipping out of Manda's grasp. Meanwhile, Tsunade leapt high into the air, grasping hold of Gamabunta's tanto. Heaving it upwards with all her might, she jammed it down through Manda's snout, pinning the giant snake to the ground.

The Snake boss let out a loud hiss of pain. "Damn you! Curse you human wretch!" He struggled to free himself, snarling in pain as the movement proved futile. "This is going to take forever to heal!" Hate-filled eyes locked on Orochimaru, narrowing in anger. "Mark my words, fool, you're all going to pay dearly for this!" That said, he vanished in a loud poof of smoke, leaving the blade behind.

Watching the smoke dissipate, Orochimaru narrowed his eyes with a snort.

Kabuto's cry suddenly brought his attention back to the still ongoing battle. "Orochimaru-sama, look out!"

Tsunade charged towards them like a stampeding bull, her arm pulled back to strike. "We're not through yet!!"

--

Naruto on her back, surrounding by darkness. Regaining consciousness, she let out a low groan and winced in discomfort. Attempting to bring her hand to her chest to alleviate the sudden pain emanating there, she was startled to realize that such an action was easier said than done. 'Wha... Why can't I... What happened to me...?'

~ PERHAPS YOU'RE DEAD... ~

Blue eyes snapped open, spotting the humanoid guise of the Kyuubi standing over her. She scowled in annoyance. "Well, this certainly isn't Heaven if you're here."

The demon snorted loudly. ~ DO YOU PLAN ON LAYING THERE FOREVER? ~ he asked calmly. At her blank stare, his expression shifted on one of boredom. ~ I NEVER KNEW HUMANS TO BE SO LAZY... ~

Despite her inability to reach and throttle him, Naruto felt her irritation at the demon growing at an alarming rate. "Shut the hell up!" she snapped. "I can't move!"

The Kyuubi wasn't fazed. ~ AND WEAK TO BOOT... ~ he let out a dismal sigh. ~ WHAT A PATHETIC SHELL I'VE BEEN TRAPPED WITHIN... ~

"I said shut up!" That did it; Naruto's anger reached critical mass. Allowing that emotion to fuel her, Naruto painfully forced herself into a sitting position so that she could glare up at him properly. Refusing to stop there, she slowly and unsteadily rose to her feet. "I... am not... weak!"

Unfortunately, the action used up what little energy she had and after wobbling on shaky legs for a few brief moments, Naruto suddenly found her body pitching forward once more--
Only to be caught by tanned, muscular arms with marks similar to those adorning her cheeks. The Kyuubi no Youko gazed down at her, a smirk slowly spreading across his face. ~ *Ooh... I tremble in fear of you*... ~

Naruto merely stared at him in stunned surprise, shocked that he had even bothered to break her fall. "What're you doing?"

He merely snorted down at her. ~ *Ensuring the woman's effort does not go to waste.* ~ At this, Naruto blinked, her face registering confusion as she muttered out a brief 'huh?'. The fox let out a suffering sigh. ~ *In case you've forgotten... your heart was nearly destroyed by the little gray worm in glasses...* ~

Naruto remembered, a low growl slipping past her lips. "Kabuto..." The creepy little traitor had almost succeeded in killing her! At that she paused, realizing that his attempt to do so had failed. "Wait... so you're saying... Tsunade healed me...?"

~ *She has more sense than I originally gave her credit...* ~ he sniffed. ~ *She battles against the snake even now.* ~

“Orochimaru?” Naruto let out a sharp gasp of alarm. Freeing herself from his grasp, she wobbled a few steps before realizing that she was once again in her mindscape. Idly she wondered whether the fox had brought her here once she fell unconscious or whether she had subconsciously come on her own. ‘Never mind that now...’ She glared back at the red headed demon across from her. “She can’t beat him on her own!”

Again, the Kyuubi didn’t seem all that concerned. ~ *No, she will not.* ~ he agreed. ~ *The snake is ours to kill.* ~

Naruto blinked at this. ‘Ours...?’

~ *Nevertheless* ~ the Bijuu went on. ~ *She will live through this day. In his current state, the snake is no threat.* ~

“I see...” Naruto fell silent, puzzling over the fox’s numerous cryptic statements. “You said you wanted to kill Orochimaru, right...?” She could feel the crimson eyes boring into her head and without hesitation, she raised her gaze to meet his head on. “Why is that? What did he do to you?”

The fox studied her silent for several long moments. Naruto suspected that he might ignore her completely, but after what seemed to be an eternity he finally answered in a low, dangerous tone. ~ *He tried to take something that was mine.* ~

--

Tsunade charged forward with a furious cry, pouring all her anger, her sorrow, and frustration into her chakra-charged fist. With the force of a mountain, that same fist slammed into Orochimaru’s jaw, driving him forcefully into the ground. Unfortunately, like every time before, the pale ninja pushed himself out of the dirt before wobbly making his way back to his feet once more.

Amber eyes narrowed in confusion. ‘What’s going on...?’ she asked herself for what seemed to be the hundredth time. ‘He takes everything I throw at him and doesn’t stay down...’ She replayed
different aspects of their battle back in her mind. S ranked criminal he may be, there was no feasible way for him to still be standing after everything he’d been dealt. Clenching a fist in frustration, she winced when her body gave a barely imperceptible shudder. ‘Damn it… I’m just about at my limit… What the hell is it going to take to finish him off?!’

His face obscured by his inky black hair, Orochimaru let out a rasping, breathy laugh. Though it was obvious to her trained eyes that he had sustained damage, it still wasn’t enough to keep him down and they all knew it. “Tsunade, Tsunade…” he chided. “Feeling frustrated, are we…? How agonizing it must be… bound by the shackles of your own pathetic humanity…”

The blonde medic scowled at him. “What the hell are you talking abou—” The rest of her words died in her throat as her pale ex-teammate lifted his head to regard her with a cocky smirk. Despite her rigorous training and overcoming of her fear of blood, Tsunade still recoiled at the sight of damaged flesh hanging down loosely on the side of his face. “My God…”

Limping over to her side, Jiraiya regarded his old teammate with a frown. ‘Now I see... that’s why he was so hard to read…’ He gazed at the torn skin, revealing the face of another underneath. “Taken to stealing other people’s bodies, Orochimaru?” he asked. “Have you really sunk so low?”

The Snake Sannin laughed. “Call it what you will, old fool…but while you slowly wither away and die, my perfection shall live on for eternity.” Taking a step back away from them, he slowly began sinking down into the ground as if it were water. Even as he ran away, the smirk on his face still remained. “Perhaps the next time we meet, I shall be merciful and put you out of your misery…”

With that, Orochimaru was gone from sight.

Kabuto glanced at the spot where his master had once stood before rising to his feet once more. Wasting no time, he ran his hands quickly through a set of seals before smirking at the two remaining Sannin. “Until we meet again.” After that, he cast Shizune – or rather, the young girl in her arms – a deep, searching glance and then vanished in a puff of smoke.

The danger finally averted, Tsunade let out a deep and heavy sigh.

Jiraiya frowned slightly at the spot where Orochimaru had vanished before turning his attention to her once more. He paused briefly, unsure of what to say. After all, what could be said about the situation with their once-comrade that hadn’t been said before. “Well, it’s over for now…”

“Yeah,” Tsunade agreed stiffly, fighting off her exhaustion. That jutsu had taken a greater toll on her body than she had expected. She could already feel the constant glamour she cast over her features fading away in order to conserve chakra.

“Tsunade…”

“I’m all right,” Her voice was soft as she lowered her head to hide her face from view. While she’d never felt concerned about Jiraiya’s opinion on her looks, for some reason she really didn’t want him to see her like this. “I… just need to rest.”

Thankfully, he made no comment, turning his attention towards the young brunette rushing over towards them with his young charge in her arms.
“Well then,” he muttered. “Let’s go out of here. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’ve had just about enough of this place than I can stand!”

Shizune glanced at her mistress briefly before giving him an agreeing nod. “Yes, let’s go!”

--

Shizune gazed down at the young girl asleep on the bed, still unable to wrap her mind around everything she had done. Tsunade had recounted what had happened while she had been unconscious, but the brunette still found it very hard to believe. Not only had the 12 year old genin managed to successfully master a Rasengan in 7 days, but she had also managed to worm her way into her mistress’ heart in that same amount of time! Shizune was very grateful, mind you, but still it seemed impossible!

“She still sleeping?”

Dark eyes shot up towards the door, falling on that of the Slug Mistress herself, her youthful guise back in place. “Tsunade-sama!”

The blonde regarded her assistant’s expression of relief with an amused smirk. “Relax, Shizune, I’m fine. I just needed a little rest.” Crossing the room, she came to stand by her side, gazing down at the bed’s occupant. “How’s the kid doing?”

“She’s doing just fine,” Shizune reported, trying to hide a smile. Despite her casual words and laid back stance, it was obvious that the Legendary Sucker had come to care for the girl. Quite surprising considering how they had butted heads upon their initial meeting.

Tsunade gazed down at Naruto’s still face, allowing a small smile to spread across her own as her eyes fell upon the slim pendant still hanging safely around her neck.

“So, still think my apprentice is a brat?”

Both women turned their attention back to the door and the white haired Sannin leaning against its frame with a knowing smirk. This time Shizune did smile – he knew as well!

His fellow Sannin regarded him with a smirk. “Of course,” she answered with a snort. “She’s loud, obnoxious, stubborn, and doesn’t know when to call it quits.”

Jiraiya chuckled, pushing away from the door to join them by the bed. “Just like the last one.”

Shizune glanced at him a few seconds before turning her attention back to Naruto once more. “Does…” she paused, wondering whether it was her place to ask such a question. “Does she know…?”

A long silence fell over the room before the Toad Sage finally answered. “I don’t think so…” He frowned slightly, running a hand through his hair. “She certainly hasn’t mentioned anything to suggest so.”

“Do you plan on telling her?” Tsunade asked.

“No.” At the two kunoichi’s sharp gasps, Jiraiya’s frown darkened slightly. “It’s not my place to tell her.”
“Not your place?” his teammate asked incredulously. ‘But aren’t you her...?’ “Whose is it, then?”

“Kakashi. He’s her Jounin instructor – I merely agreed to train her for the Chuunin Exams.”

The Chuunin exams had been at least two months ago... Tsunade regarded her old teammate with a knowing look. Deciding not to press the issue, she kept the conversation on the topic at hand. “Hatake Kakashi…” A glance from him indicated that there was definitely more to the story and he knew she knew it. “You really are living in the past, huh, Jiraiya...?”

Knowing he was caught, he let out a soft chuckle. “I guess...” He shifted his gaze to Naruto once more, a gentle smile spreading across his face. There really were no words to describe how proud of her he was. He’d known from the beginning that she’d pull off the impossible, but seeing it in person was something else entirely... ‘You’d do your folks proud, kid...’ “She’s just as obnoxious as they were at her age...” he said aloud. “But... you can’t help but like her.”

Shizune giggled, before letting out a gasp when her eyes fell on a nearby clock. “Wow, it’s almost noon already...” Had 24 hours since that awful battle gone by already...?

“Mhm,” Tsunade agreed. “The kid’s gonna be starving when she wakes up, I suspect.”

Her assistant nodded. “Still, given all the strain she put on her body, I doubt she’ll be up anytime soon.”

“All the same...” Tsunade glanced curiously at her old squad mate. “Do you suppose she packed anything food-wise in her pack.”

Jiraiya walked over to her backpack, propping it up on the bed as he rooted through its contents. After several moments he pulled out a couple boxes of candy and several packages of noodles. “Ah, here we go.”

Tsunade regarded him with a disapproving glare. “You’re joking, right?”

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

‘Men...’ “The girl’s been asleep for an entire day,” she explained slowly, as if speaking to a child. She almost smirked in amusement at his annoyed scowl. “Do you really think she’s going to want some Pocky and three cups of Ramen--?”

Like magic, the girl in question jerked upwards – effectively tossing a startled Tonton off of the bed – into a sitting position, bright blue eyes searching eagerly around the room. “Ramen? Did somebody mention Ramen? C’mon, I’m sooo hungry!”

Both Tsunade and Shizune blinked in surprise.

Jiraiya merely grinned. ‘Yup... she’s their kid all right...’

Spotting the three adults gazing back at her with varying expressions, Naruto’s eyes zeroed in on her ‘sensei’ and the packages of noodles in his hands. Letting out an outraged gasp, she sat up straighter, jabbing an accusing finger in his direction. “Oi! What’re you doing with my rations, old man?”
“Relax, kiddo…” he chuckled, holding up a hand in a placating gesture. “I was just gonna go get some hot water to fix these noodles up for you?”

Naruto’s expression immediately shifted from righteous fury to unbridled joy. “Really?” she chirped excitedly. “You’re my hero!”

Jiraiya chuckled. “Oh, I am, am I? Then you wouldn’t mind treating your hero to some sake?” At her incredulous glare, he laughed outright. “Don’t worry about getting up, I know where your money is.”

“Wha…?! You leave my Gama-chama alone, Ero-sennin!”

“I *told* you not to call me that!”

Tsunade regarded the pair a few moments with an expression of open wonder before succumbing to a fit of loud laughter.

--

“C’momnn, Ero-sennin! Let’s go! I can’t wait to see everybody again!”

“All right, all right, kid! Keep your shirt on!”

The small group consisting of Naruto, Jiraiya, Shizune, Tsunade, and Tonton set out on the road early the next morning, their destination Konohagakure. They had all talked things over the night before, and it was finally agreed that Tsunade would return home to the village, not only to heal Naruto’s teammates, but to assume the role of Godaime Hokage.

~ "I'm protecting the future of Konohagakure no Sato... is my sworn and sacred duty... as Godaime Hokage!” ~

Tsunade remembered the words she had spoken very clearly. It had been so long since she had had the strength to believe in anything, but she knew the moment she spoke those words she had never felt more strongly than anything else in her entire life. It was strange to think that all it had taken was an almost impossible bet made with a 12 year old genin.

“Oi, Ero-sennin!”

Amber eyes fell on the young blonde bouncing ahead in the distance, softening as a small smile drifted across her face. She reminded her so much of the ones she had lost, her strength, her determination… her actions had managed to wake her up and pull her out of the darkness. For that, Tsunade would forever be grateful.

‘Do you see her, Nawaki? Dan?’ Before, when Tsunade had looked at Naruto, she had been reminded of those she lost. Reminded of her pain, her loneliness, and the guilt she had felt at their deaths. Now, after seeing her strength, her determination, she was reminded of their own strength, and the reasons why they had lived. In her, their dreams still had a chance at coming true. Tsunade would see to it they did. With a little help, of course. ‘Please watch over her so she can keep your dream alive…’

As if she were aware of her attention, Naruto stopped, turning to her with a curious expression on her face. “Hey, what’s the matter?” she asked softly. “Old bones getting’ to ya, Tsunade-baba?”
All soft and gentle thoughts Tsunade had for the girl fled out the window, terrified at the furious expression currently residing on her face. Even Jiraiya and Shizune took a step back. “What did you say, you little runt?”

Naruto’s expression quickly shifted to match her own. “Who’re you callin’ a runt, you old hag!”

“Midget!”

“Witch!”

“Dwarf!”

“Mule!”

Tonton let out an oink of dismay only to get pulled back by Jiraiya. “Uh-uh, Pinky… you don’t wanna get involved with this… trust me…”

“Oink…”

“Get this straight, you little squirt! I am not old!”

“You are too, you crotchety old nag!” Naruto snapped angrily.

Tsunade paused, placing her hands on her hips. “Sheesh… what am I doing? A Hokage shouldn’t lower herself to arguing with a little genin.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not Hokage yet!” the younger blonde growled. “You gotta get back to Konoha first!”

“Calm down, you little brat,” the medic smirked. “You’re not worth the hassle.”

“Oh yeah?” she countered. “Don’t forget, I won your bet! I mastered the Rasengan in a week – that proves that I’ve got what it takes to be Hoka—” The rest of Naruto’s words were cut off by a sharp yelp as a red lacquered finger reached forward, flipping her hitai-ate high up into the air. ‘Shit – not this again!’ Bracing herself for the impact sure to come, Naruto shut her eyes, tensing her body in preparation.

“Naruto…” Tsunade leaned forward, placing a kiss on her exposed forehead.

The blonde stilled, blinking owlishly up at her. “Huh…?”

The older kunoichi merely smiled down at her. “You’re already a fine ninja…” she said softly. “And there’s no doubt in my mind that you’re going to be a great Hokage…” She paused, her smile widening into a grin. “Naru-chan.”

Surprised and yet pleased at the unexpected praise, a deep blush spread across the young kunoichi’s face until it was covered up by a wide grin. “Believe it!”

~ End Chapter 28b
Chapter 29: Reunion

Chapter Summary

The prodigal kunoichi returns to Konoha.

Leaning casually against the worn counter surface in front of her, Tenten's keen eyes focused in on her target in the distance. Raising her hand slowly and surely, she carefully took aim and with a quick flick of her wrist let her projectile fly. Cutting through the air quickly and silently, it thudded softly into a dart on the other side of the room, joining its predecessors in forming a perfectly neat circle around the center bull's-eye.

Though pleased with her success, the weapons mistress of Team Gai let out a heavy sigh. Off days were so boring! Tenten enjoyed a day off just as much as the next person, but when they were spent minding her uncle's weapons' supply shop the young kunoichi was almost certain she would rather spend her time engaged in one of Gai-sensei's bizarre and unusual training exercises!

At the thought of her Jounin instructor, Tenten's mind immediately went to that of her injured teammate. 'Lee...' A small frown made its way across the young brunette's face. Given the state of the village, her teammate's incapacitation hadn't diminished the amount of missions their team received, but it just wasn't the same without Lee and his 'youthfulness'. It was obvious that even Neji felt the same.

She had certainly been worried for Lee. For him to have come so far, enduring so much scorn and ridicule, long and arduous training sessions, only to be cut down so viciously... Tenten was almost glad she hadn't been conscious for his fight against Gaara - she wasn't sure she would have been able to take it. Rumor had it that despite his amazing performance - he'd even opened a Gate! - Lee hadn't stood a chance against the Suna-nin's Ultimate Defense. Later, when she had learned that there was a possibility that Lee might never recover as a ninja, she had been so worried that it would break him.

Slowly twirling a senbon idly between her fingers, Tenten remembered the expression on his face when Gai had given them the news. Only Neji's intervention had kept her from going to him. She'd been annoyed at his interference at first, but she realized that there really was nothing that she could do. After all, Lee had worked so hard to work his skill, alongside them and Gai-sensei, as well as independently. He believed that hard work and dedication would help him achieve his own goals. As his friend it hurt the weapons' mistress to see his 'youthfulness' stripped away, but while she and Neji were his teammates and would do all they could to support him, this was a situation he had to come to grips with on his own.

Realizing the depressing track her thoughts had taken, Tenten sat up, giving her head a thoughtful shake. "What am I worrying about all this for?" she asked herself aloud. "Lee's gonna get better and then we're all gonna be a team again. So there!" With that decided she tossed the senbon once more, grinning in satisfaction as it hit the direct center of the bull's-eye.

"Tenten!"

The brunette looked up as another young girl entered the shop, a red-headed kunoichi that she'd been friends with in the Academy that specialized in traps. A grin spread across her face once more...
- it was good to finally have some company! "Reika-san!" she greeted. "Out of kunai again? You go through so many!"

The girl grinned right back at her. "You're one to talk." she said, feigning indignation. "And to think I came all the way here to tell you the good news." She paused, and Tenten cocked her head in curiosity. "Guess who's returned to the village?"

"Who?"

Reika's green eyes shined in excitement. "Only the strongest, coolest, most amazing kunoichi ever to come out of Konohagakure no Sato!"

Tenten jumped up out of her seat, her eyes widening to the size of ramen bowls. "No way - are you serious! Could it really be---?!"

---

"Naruto! Stop running!" Tsunade chided. "You'll knock somebody over!"

The blonde in question turned back to glance at the blonde medic-ninja several steps above her. "What are you talking about? There's nobody to knock down! Besides, you promised you'd come and help right after you got finished with those old goats in the fancy robes!"

It took the Slug Mistress a lot of effort to keep from laughing outright at the thought of Homura and Koharu being referred to as 'old goats'. 'Better them than me...' Restraining herself, she regarded the smaller blonde with sigh. "I know, I know... don't get your kunai in a knot, I'll keep my promise." When Naruto's body slumped in relief, the older kunoichi fixed a smirk to her face. "Though I must say you sure are very eager to help this Sasuke-kid..." Inwardly she recalled the blonde's description of her friends back home that required her medical assistance. She'd certainly had quite a bit to say about the young male member of her team. "I thought you said you didn't like him."

Despite her teasing, Naruto didn't take the bait. "Arghh!! I can't stand his arrogant ass," she said with a snort of disdain. "But he's my teammate and teammates never abandon each other."

Tsunade's expression sobered and she nodded slightly. "Right." Folding her arms across her chest, she closed her eyes with a sigh. "Well then, let's do this."

"All right, let's go! Let's go!"

"Jeez, only one person could be so loud so early in the morning..."

Naruto paused and blinked, turning her head towards the two figures approaching the bottom of the staircase. She recognized the signature pineapple hairstyle almost instantly. "Shikamaru!"

The resident slacker genius of Team 10 regarded her with a smirk, raising his hand in greeting. "Yo,"

The stairs separating them were quickly diminished as Naruto regarded her childhood friend with a bright and curious grin. Said grin faltered slightly when she noted the scarred older ninja standing slightly behind him. Noting the family resemblance, she grinned again, bowing her head in greeting. He gave her a slight greeting smirk in return.

Tsunade stopped a few steps behind her, nodding her head at the pair in greeting. "Nara Shikaku, right?" she guessed with a faint grin. "It's been a while."
He grinned back in return, "It certainly has, Tsunade-sama,"

"You're taking care of those deer of yours, aren't you?" she asked. "Those antlers are used as ingredients in a lot of medicines..."

Shifting his attention from the two adults, Shikamaru leaned forward to address his old schoolmate. "So," he drawled casually. "Who's the woman?"

Blue eyes blinked at him before shifting over to the older blonde. "That's Tsunade, one of the Legendary Three." she answered. "Don't be fooled by her looks... she's really 50!"

"No kidding, huh? So what's she doing mixed up with you?"

"Oi!" Though she knew he was only teasing, Naruto folded her arms across her chest, turning away in mock irritation. "So annoying! What're you doing here anyway?"

Shikamaru smirked back at her. "I could ask you the same thing."

The blonde made a face. "I asked first!"

"Sheesh... I forgot how troublesome you were..." Shikamaru scratched the back of his head absently. "If you hafta know, I came to handle some troublesome business."

"Troublesome business...?" The blonde's eyes crossed slightly in irritation; only Shikamaru would be so vague. She opened her mouth to make a reply only to notice something was a bit off. Studying him carefully, she spotted the light green flak jacket adorned over his usual attire. Her eyes widened in surprise. "Whaaa... you're a Chuunin now, Shikamaru??"

The spiky haired boy grimaced. Here he was faced with someone who had actually wanted to become a Chuunin, had fought hard and won both her bouts, and yet he was the only one Rookie 9 the Council had deemed worthy enough to promote to the next level. It was the only time he could recall his backing out of a fight putting him in such a situation. 'How troublesome... I hope she's not gonna start yelling about how unfair it is--eh?'

The rest of Shikamaru's thought was completely cut off as the blonde jumped forward, wrapping her arms around his shoulders in a tight hug. Totally unprepared for such a reaction, certainly from Naruto of all people, he squirmed slightly, his cheeks suspiciously pink. "N-Naruto...?"

Oblivious to his discomfort, Naruto grinned back at him, her blue eyes shining in excitement. "That's so cool, Shikamaru! I knew you could do it!"

He vaguely recalled her bopping him over the head and calling him lazy for giving up in the midst of his fight, but seeing her genuine pride over his promotion made him hold his tongue. Weird... he hadn't made a big fuss over it when Ino found out the news, so why was he reacting this way now?

Before he could ponder the matter further, Naruto stepped away, still grinning widely. "Maybe now that you're a Chuunin you might actually put that brain of yours to work!"

Tsunade turned back to them, smiling slightly as if she and Shikaku hadn't been listening in on their conversation the entire time. "I've heard that your son is quite the strategist, Shikaku." She turned to face the laidback jounin, her smile widening into a grin. "We'll certainly be putting him to use in the future."

Seeing his son grimace slightly, Shikaku let out a slight chuckle. "Shikamaru is at your service, Tsunade-sama."
The older woman grinned back in response. "Glad to hear it." That said, she continued down the steps more. "Good day to you, gentlemen. Let's go, Naruto."

Shikaku bowed his head slightly, allowing her to pass. "Tsunade-sama."

Naruto blinked before jogging after her. "Hey! Wait up!" She paused briefly to toss a quick wave over her shoulder. "See you later, Shika!"

Shikamaru watched the pair go, still grimacing slightly. "Jeez, what a pushy woman."

His father chuckled. "That woman is the new Hokage," he answered. "And probably the strongest woman to ever come out of Konoha."

"A female Hokage, huh? Man, how troublesome..." the newly appointed Chuunin sighed. "Women are so pushy... You never have any idea what's going on in those heads of theirs..."

"Don't think so poorly of women, son," his father chided. "After all, without women... there wouldn't be any men around..."

"I guess..." the boy consented.

"And always remember," his father continued. "Even the toughest woman will be tender to the man she loves." At this he paused, giving his son a look.

"Ehh...?" Despite his efforts, Shikamaru's mind automatically went back to the impromptu hug his blonde classmate had bestowed upon him. Though he had no doubt the blonde seemed happy about his achievement, he felt as though the hug had been due more to the fact that she was just happy to see him... At least, that was what it had seemed like from her expression when she first spotted him. Or was that just wishful thinking on his part?

'Wishful thinking...?' He paused, shaking his head roughly to rid himself of the thought. "Jeez, how troublesome..."

His father chuckled again, although at what Shikamaru wasn't sure he wanted to know. "Don't worry son," he smirked. "I'm sure your way of thinking'll change once you get older."

"Doubt it," he muttered in return.

Giving up the matter, Shikaku only responded with a shrug. "At any rate, let's hurry up and get home... If we're late your mother'll scold me."

Following dutifully after his father, Shikamaru rolled his eyes with a grimace. "Tender to the man she loves'?... Yeah right... more like she's got him whipped... Jeez, I never hope I get that stupid..."

Yet despite his train of thought, his mind wouldn't let him forget the feel of his old friend's arms around him... and why the feeling hadn't bothered him as much as it should have.

--

"I can't believe Shikamaru made Chuunin!"

Tsunade glanced over at the blonde walking beside her, an amused grin still prevalent on her face. "Well, according to Koharu-sama and Homura-sama, your friend performed very well in both of his matches. Sarutobi-sensei and the Feudal lords agreed early on that he was an excellent candidate for promotion."
Naruto remained silent, a thoughtful expression on her face.

The newly Godaime Hokage continued her silent study of the pensive blonde all the way to the hospital. Once they reached the room assigned to her teammate, Naruto rushed ahead. Sliding the door wide open, blue eyes immediately zeroed in on the room's occupants, the unconscious dark haired boy and the pink haired girl sitting vigilant at his bedside.

"Neechan!"

Sakura started in surprise, whipping her head around to meet her gaze with wide green eyes. "Narukun...?" Her face quickly brightened as a relieved smile bloomed across her face. "You're back!"

"Of course I am! You didn't think I'd stay gone forever, right?"

Tsunade watched the pair's exchange, her amber eyes warm.

'So this is her other teammate, hm?' Her eyes drifted over to the small vase sitting on the nightstand beside the pink haired kunoichi. The two white daffodils contained within looked as fresh as the day they were picked. 'She must have brought those in today... Does she visit everyday...? She paused, her expression turning thoughtful. 'What a strange team dynamic...'

Oblivious to her thoughts, Naruto was still chattering on to her teammate, no doubt about all her exploits during her time way from the village. "And guess what, Sakura-nee-chan? We brought back Tsunade-baba --"

At this, the older woman scowled; the little urchin had taken to the moniker once they set out for Konoha and just would not stop. Old lady Tsunade, indeed... 'Little brat...'

"--and she's gonna heal Sasuke!"

The pink haired kunoichi gasped, jumping to her feet. She turned towards the older kunoichi, bowing low. "Oh please!" she exclaimed. "Please help Sasuke-kun!"

Tsunade smiled at her, striding confidently over to the bed. Studying the pale boy a few moments, she raised a hand aglow in healing green chakra and rested it gently over his forehead.

Sakura stared at her silently, her hands clasped tightly together in prayer.

After a few tense moments, Sasuke let out a low groan and opened his eyes blearily. Sitting up slowly and stiffly, he stared out blankly around the room.

Glad to see the Sannin's success, Naruto's face split into a wide grin. "It worked!" she laughed joyously. "Sasuk--!"

"Sasuke-kun!" In a blur of moment, Sakura leapt forward, latching her arms around the boy as she began sobbing in relief.

Startled, Naruto merely blinked at her teammate in confusion. "Huh...? Neechan...?"

If she heard her, Sakura didn't respond. She continued sobbing, tightening her grip on the boy's dark shirt. "I'm... I'm so glad..." she gasped. "So glad... I thought you'd never come back..."

Suddenly aware of her proximity, Sasuke shifted slightly, staring down at her silently as if he was seeing her for the first time. At first it didn't seem as though he would react, but after a few moments he raised his hand, resting it lightly on her shoulder.
Both kunoichi of Team 7 started in surprise, although for entirely different reasons. While Sakura was grateful for Sasuke's recovery, she was surprised that he was reacting so positively to her sudden declaration. She had been so certain that he would push her away, but his hand remained in place, tightening ever so slightly as if he were trying to assure himself of her presence.

Naruto, however, felt something entirely different. She remained very still, watching the pair as if she was uncertain of what she was seeing. While she was happy for both her teammates, she couldn't help but feel a little disconcerted. Although the Sasuke before her was silent, almost comforting to the distraught girl sitting before him, all she could see was the Sasuke that had stared her down in Otafuku. During his fight with Itachi he had stared her down with such hatred and fury, as if it were her fault he was in such a situation.

~ "No!" ~ She remembered the two-tomoed Sharingan blazing back at her. ~ "Stay out of this, Naruto!" ~

~ "I'm only here to fight strong opponents. Next time, don't get in my way. I can fight battles on my own." ~

A cold feeling suddenly settled over the blonde and she glanced away from the pair, feeling almost as though she was intruding on something private.

Noticing the shift in the atmosphere, Tsunade blinked and turned towards her fellow blonde only to see her vanishing out of the room. 'Naru...' She glanced back at the other two genin who didn't seem to be aware of their other teammate's absence. The Slug Mistress found herself frowning thoughtfully once again. 'An interesting dynamic indeed...' As she moved to make her exit as well, she paused when she noticed Naru's hand beckoning her out of the room. Chuckling slightly, she followed out after her.

--

Once exiting her teammate's room, Naruto made her way to the room assigned to her sensei. Turning her attention to the Sannin behind her, she slid the door open and stepped in. "And now for Kakashi-sen...Oomph!"

Muscular arms encased in green spandex seemed to shoot out of nowhere, pulling the blonde into a big bear hug against an equally spandex covered chest. "Naru-san!" a booming voice exclaimed. "Thank Kami-sama you've returned safely!"

Had her face not been obscured by the Beautiful Green Beast's vest, Naruto surely would have been blinded by the bright, shiny grin threatening to split the Taijutsu master's face in two. "Guh... Gai-shenshei? What're you doin' here...?"

Team Gai's jounin instructor finally released her, continuing to grin brightly down at her. "Keeping watch over my youthful rival and praying for the success of your mission, of course!" As he said this, his teeth gave off a tiny ping!

Naruto laughed nervously. "Right... thanks!" Turning her attention back to her teacher, she realized that he was now sitting up, talking quietly with the Godaime Hokage.

Tsunade gazed down at the younger ninja sitting up on the bed, tsking loudly. "To think... the Great Copy Ninja Hatake Kakashi allowed himself to be taken down by two punks like that..."
paused, resting her hands on her hips. "Sheesh, what a shame..."

To his credit, Kakashi only sighed, scratching his head absently. "Yeah... sorry..." Glancing away from her, he spotted the smaller blonde standing by the doorway. "Naruto...?"

The young genin remained silent, staring back at her sensei with wide blue eyes. Hatake Kakashi was exhausted; everything from his posture to his expression said so. It was unnatural seeing her strong sensei in such a condition. It hadn't been this bad back in Nami! To know that his state was result of her and her 'tenant' filled her with that same painful feeling she'd felt once before. Blinking when she realized everyone's attention was on her, Naruto flushed and stared down at the floor in shame.

Confused at his student's behavior, Kakashi furrowed his brow at her in concern. "Naruto?" he called out once more. "What's wrong? You're not hurt, are you?"

The blonde shook her head, directing her gaze to the floor. "...m'sorry..."

The gray-haired jounin blinked. "Hm? Sorry, Naruto, my head's a little foggy... What'd you say?"

"It's all my fault..." she murmured softly, clenching her fists tightly at her side. "You... an' Sasuke got hurt 'cuz those guys were after me... After what's in me..."

The droopy eyed jounin stilled, his expression softening in understanding. 'So, she knows...'

"Naru-san..." Gai murmured softly.

"So, I'm sorry..." she continued, her expression tightening as she struggled to reign in her emotions. She could feel that familiar burning at the corner of her eyes but she refused to give in to it. She had promised herself that she was going to get stronger! She remembered Sasuke's battered body and the tears Sakura had shed over him. She couldn't allow them to suffer like that over her! "I promise... I'm gonna train harder... and get stronger so I can protect myself... So that you guys won't ever get hurt 'cuz of me again... I promise!"

The room fell into silence once more.

Kakashi closed his eye and let out a sigh. "Naruto... c'mere..." After a second of hesitation, she did as he asked, stopping once she stood directly by his bedside. Opening his eye once more, he regarded her with a soft, solemn expression. "I can't let you make a promise like that..." he said softly. "You won't be able to keep it."

"I will!" she exclaimed loudly. "I never go back on my word! It's part of my nindo - you know that, Kakashi-sensei!"

"And I will always do whatever I can to protect my comrades and my students," he told her. Pausing slightly, he regarded her with an eye grin. "I guess you can say that's a part of my nindo."

The blonde stilled, her blue eyes bright and watery. She gazed at him, her vision wavering slightly. "Kakashi-sensei..." She leaned forward to rest her head against his shoulder, gripping the material of his shirt.

The gray haired jounin stilled, staring down at his student in surprise. However, his expression softened once more when he felt the warm moisture seeping through the material of his shirt. Gazing down at his student, he was suddenly reminded of Iruka's words to him during the blonde's stay in the hospital.
Kakashi sighed again as he gazed down at the young blonde under his charge. He never would have expected the situation to pan itself this way; Naruto had always been a very physical person, reacting to the slightest of insults against her, but save for Nami he'd never truly seen her get emotional. It reminded him that despite all her brashness and bravado the blonde was still very young. *Naru...*

Aware that the blonde's tears seemed to have ceased, he lifted his hand, resting it lightly on top of her head. This time slight tensing of her shoulders was barely even noticeable. "We in Team 7 do not abandon our teammates..." He grinned once again. "Did you forget that already, Naru?"

She straightened up, giving him a shaky smile as she dried her eyes with a sleeve. "Never."

Observing the tender moment from the door with Gai, Tsunade smiled at the pair briefly before clearing her throat. "Well," she said loudly to gain their attention. "I'd hate to break things up, but I am busy woman with other patients to see."

"Yes! Yes!" Gai said excitedly, bouncing up and down on the balls on his feet. "Like my Lee!"

At the mention of said genin, Naruto's eyes brightened. "Yeah! Lee! He's gonna be able to be a ninja again!" Leaping away from the bed, she dashed out of the room in a blur of orange. "I'll go find him!"

The three adults blinked at her sudden departure.

"Goodness," Tsunade sighed. "Is she always like this...?"

"No..." Kakashi replied, closing his eyes in a grin once more. "But it's good to have her back."

---

Having finished his physical therapy session for the day, Lee walked slowly down the hall with the aid of his crutches. His mind was blank to keep himself from worrying too much about his situation. After all, what was the point of stressing himself? He had to stay positive didn't he? Hadn't that been what Uzumaki Naru-san suggested?

~ *Just be strong, don't doubt, and have faith in yourself. It may take a while, but you can do it! Rock Lee will be a ninja again - believe it!* ~

"Hey, Lee!"

Realizing his name was being called, and probably had been called several times, the green clad genin stopped in place, turning in the direction from which the voice came. His eyes widened at the orange clad girl running in his direction. Could that really be...?

"Lee!" Naruto skidded to a stop in front of him, beaming brightly. "Are you okay?"

He blinked at her, studying her in awe. Had she really run all this way just to see him? "Naruto--Naru-san? Is that you?"

This time she blinked, cocking her head slightly. "Of course it is! I was only gone for about a month..." She pouted slightly. "You didn't forget me already, did you?"

As if he were appalled at the very suggestion, he exclaimed, "I could never forget you, Naru-san!"
Surprised at his vehemence, Naruto glanced away, letting out an embarrassed chuckle.

Lee smiled at her, studying her thoughtfully. There was something about her that was different, he noticed. When he told her as much, she blinked once more, tilting her head slightly in curiosity. "Ah! That's it! Your hair has grown!"

"Huh?" Naruto blinked a third time, studying the blonde locks that hung around her face and brushed lightly against her shoulders. Fingering one of the locks for her inspection, she realized it had grown quite a bit in the fast few weeks. Although it always had; she remembered having such a hard time trying to keep it short in order to maintain the whole 'being a boy' illusion. Turning her attention back to her fellow genin, she shrugged casually. "Huh, guess I'll just have to cut it again. 'Heh... after all the fuss she made during my makeover, she'd probably have a fit...'

Unaware of her thoughts, the injured genin continued to study her hair, realizing the length made her look far more feminine than her outfit during her last visit to the hospital had. "You should keep it like this," he said. Meeting her curious gaze, he smiled slightly. "It makes you look very youthful, Naru-san. I like it."

"Oh..." Naruto rubbed the back of her head, in a rare show of bashfulness. "Thanks!"

It was at this point that Tsunade and Gai came upon the pair. The jounin spotted them first, waving them over with a wide, happy grin. "Ah, Lee, Naru-san! There you are! We've been looking for you!"

Lee pulled his gaze away from Naruto at the sound of his teacher's voice, blinking curiously. "Gai-sensei?"

"There's someone here to see you!" he explained.

Naruto grasped Lee's free hand, leading him the rest of the way towards them. Lee flushed in surprise at the action, surprised at how mindful she was of the fact that he still needed his crutches. He stared at their joined hands, marveling at the warmth he could feel through the wrappings on each of their hands. It was... nice.

"Tsunade-baachan!" Naruto and Lee came to a stop in front of the two adults, oblivious to the looks being sent towards their joined hands. "This is Lee! One of the people I was telling you about!"

The Hokage studied the boy as he bowed in greeting, her trained eyes taking in his crutches and stiff posture.

"You're all set to heal him, too, right?"

Tsunade turned her attention back to the younger blonde, her smile slightly strained at the sight of the hopeful anticipation in her eyes. "Naru, why don't you go back and check on your teammates?"

Blue eyes blinked back at her. "Huh?"

"You've been gone well over a month..." she reasoned, well aware that the blonde's cluelessness was an attempt at covering up the obvious unease she'd felt at seeing her teammates in such a position. "I'm sure they've missed you." Naruto's bland look plainly said 'yeah right'. There certainly were a lot of unresolved issues amidst the new Team 7, Tsunade decided. She'd definitely have to have a word about that with Kakashi when she found the time. All the same... She paused, her expression turning positively mischievous. "Unless of course you'd like to stay here with us..."
and watch your friend strip...?"

The reaction was absolutely priceless. Naruto let out a high pitched yip while poor Lee's face flushed red in embarrassment.

"Tsunade-sama!" Gai gasped out, scandalized. She merely smirked unrepentantly.

Recovering quickly, Naruto regarded the newly appointed Hokage with an irritated frown, her own cheeks still a suspicious tint. What was it with everybody coming to the same assumptions about her? It was ridiculous! "You sound worse than Ero-sennin!" She ignored the older blonde's sudden twitch of irritation, turning her attention to a still blushing Lee. She gave his hand an encouraging squeeze, fixing a bright grin to her face. "I'll see ya later on, 'kay, Lee? We can have a sparring match when you're all better!"

The thought of a match against the blonde erased all embarrassment from his countenance, replacing it with a wide grin. "I would not miss it for the world!" he promised.

Nodding, Naruto released his hand, turning to jog off down the hall, waving as she went. "See ya later!"

Waiting until she vanished around the corner, Tsunade let out a sigh, gesturing to an empty room. "All right, let's do this."

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Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Lee shrugged out of the top half of his jumpsuit, exposing his back so that the examination could begin. Tsunade came over to stand beside him, gently placing a had aglow in chakra over his spine. For the next several minutes the room was completely silent, the two taijutsu masters waiting anxiously for the results of her diagnostic jutsu.

After what seemed like an eternity, the green chakra faded into nothingness. Gai stared at the Hokage entreatingly, his dark eyes wide. "Well, Tsunade-sama...?"

Tsunade sighed, closing her eyes. "I'm sorry..." Both Gai and Lee tensed stiffly. "I hate to be the one to tell you this... but you should give up being a ninja..."

Lee froze, the world around him seeming to screech to an abrupt halt.

"Wha...?" Gai began, letting out a startled laugh. "You're joking... Right...?"

The blonde kunoichi shook her head ruefully, amber eyes opening to reveal the seriousness of her words. "Fragments from the damage have drifted through his bloodstream, collecting around his spinal column," she explained solemnly. "I'm the only one capable of performing the surgery to remove them but it's a highly dangerous procedure. Should it fail, it would most likely kill you."

The young genin remained very still, his dark eyes wide and hazy.

She sighed once more. "Again, I'm sorry... but that's my prognosis..."

"Then we'll get a second opinion!" Gai exclaimed, his expression frantic. "There's bound to be a-- Lee?" Stiffly and silently, the young genin re-clothed himself and rose to his feet with the aid of his crutch. Without uttering a word to either adult, he slowly hobbled towards the door. "Lee!"

Pausing only to bow his head to the Hokage, Lee continued out the door.
"Lee..." the jounin turned his gaze to the Hokage once more, his eyes dark and accusing. "Who are you and what have you done to Tsunade-hime?!" he demanded. "She would have never said such horrible things!"

"Gai," she murmured softly, her amber eyes pale at the upset she knew she had caused both teacher and student. "I sympathize with your student, but the verdict remains the same... An operation that complex has a 50/50 success rate..." She paused, fixing him with a searching gaze. "Can you ask your student to make a decision like that?"

The younger man gazed down at the floor, a sad frown making its way across his face. "But becoming a ninja has always been Lee's dream..."

Tsunade paused, her mind replaying snippets of that fateful battle, and the mocking words Kabuto had spat towards the little blonde that had saved her life...

~ "Hopes and dreams are a waste of time..." ~

~ "To be Hokage... that's my dream!" ~

Hearing the blonde's words echoing in her head, she turned her attention back to the defeated-looking jounin behind her. 'His student must be very important to him...' she thought to herself.

~ "Someone once told me... people discover true strength when they're fighting to protect someone else..." ~

"Talk to your student," she heard herself murmur softly. "I will see what I can do to improve his chances... Still, the decision is ultimately up to him."

Life seemed to return to the younger ninja, his dark eyes shining with hope once more. "Thank you, Godaime-sama, thank you!" he exclaimed. With a quick bow, he dashed out of the room.

She watched him go, a thoughtful expression passing over her face. "Hokage-sama..." She glanced out the nearby window, the Hokage monument coming into view. Already she could see scaffolding going up around the section that would eventually bear her likeness. "Hm... who would've thought...?"

--

To her credit, Naruto did consider returning to Sasuke's hospital room... for all of thirty-five seconds. If she was to be honest with herself, she wasn't quite ready to faced with Sasuke's angry eyes or accusations. Surely he'd want to know why she was in Otafuku with Jiraiya and why his brother and some weird nuke-nin from Kirigakure had gone through all the trouble of incapacitating their jounin-sensei to track her down. That would mean explaining her status as Jinchuuriki and that was something she was not certain she'd ever be able to do.

Letting out a forlorn sigh, the blonde considered the notion of tracking down Iruka for a bowl of ramen when she was halted by the sound of an unfamiliar voice calling her name.

"Hey, Uzumaki-kun!"

She turned, spotting a dark haired Chuunin approaching her from down the hall. As he neared her, she studied the white bandages criss-crossing over his nose with a thoughtful frown. "I know you from somewhere?"

Kotetsu grinned, running a hand through his hair with a half-hearted chuckle. "Chuunin exams," he
explained. "Your teammate saw through my genjutsu."

"Ohhh yeah! You and the other guy were guarding the second floor!" She paused, cocking her head in curiosity. "You were looking for something?"

"Yeah... you." The blonde blinked. "Me and Izumo need your help."

"Eh...?"

--

Before long, Naruto found herself back at the Hokage tower, walking down a familiar hall leading to an equally familiar set of old wooden doors. Arriving at what she assumed was their intended destination, she spotted Izumo flanked by two young Academy students.

"Moegi-chan! Udon-kun!"

The two children looked up, their eyes brightening at the sight of their 'Leader'.

"Boss!"

"Naru-nee-chan!" Moegi studied her appearance, letting out a girlish squeal. "Your hair's so cute!!"

At the three males' curious stares, Naruto let out a nervous laugh before turning their attention back to the situation at hand. "Uhh... what exactly is going on here? Where's Konohamaru?" Four fingers pointed to the set of doors behind them. "What? Are you serious?"

Izumo nodded solemnly. "We came across Konohamaru-sama this morning as we were delivering some paperwork for Tsunade-sama," he explained. "When we explained to him that she was to become the new Hokage, he got really upset."

Naruto's eyes darkened in understanding. "He's been in there since then?"

Moegi nodded fretfully. "He locked himself in and hasn't come out since..." She bit her lip, sniffling softly. "Nee-chan, we're really worried!"

"Has anyone tried talking to him?"

"We tried asking him to come out," Kotetsu offered. "The kids tried, too, but when that didn't work they suggested we try and find you."

The blonde nodded, a frown slowly making its way across her face. Making her way over to the door, she raised a hand to knock on its surface.

"Umm, Boss, I wouldn't--"

As soon as her sandaled foot touched down in front of the door, a bucket dropped down from the ceiling above. Quick to act, Naruto dove to the side, narrowly avoiding being covered in a sticky substance she assumed was either syrup or honey. "...the hell...??"

"Molasses, huh?" Izumo observed. "That's a heck of a lot better than what you got hit with, huh, Tetsu?"

"Shove it, Izumo."

Obviously Konohamaru was upset at the thought of his grandfather being replaced, and thought...
that keeping his successor out of his office would delay things. Still, for someone who wanted to be Hokage himself one day, surely he had to realize that his actions weren't going to change anything! All he was doing was making people worry about him! 'Not to mention pissing me off trying to prank me... with one of my own creations at that!' Her sympathy quickly turning to irritation, Naruto turned to face the door once more. "Oi, Konohamaru! You come out of there right now!"

There was a pause before they heard a muffled, "Leave me alone!"

"Not until you come out of there!" she yelled back. "Now open this door!"

"Go away!" he countered. "I'm the Honorable Grandson! You hafta do what I say!"

So they were back to that crap, were they? Naruto's blue eyes glinted in irritation. "Back to being a spoiled brat, are we?" she snarled. Both Izumo and Kotetsu started in surprise. "What happened to all that talk about you wanting to be known for just being Konohamaru, not the Hokage's grandson!"

There was a pause, followed by a muffled sound.

"What was that?" Kotetsu asked. Izumo just shrugged.

"Konohamaru?"

"I said go away!!"

Muttering a curse under her breath, Naruto glanced back at the two chuunin behind her. "Hey, how sturdy are these two doors?"

"Pretty sturdy," Izumo answered. "Why?"

Forming a cross seal, Naruto created two Kage bunshin that she quickly sent off down the hall. She waited several minutes, ignoring the groups questioning glances, until the two clones returned carrying large hunks of rock.

"W-where the heck did that come from?" Kotetsu gawked.

"From the courtyard," one of the clones answered.

"Is that bad?"

Ignoring the sputtering Chuunin, Naruto glared at the double doors. "Last chance, Konohamaru! Come out or I'm coming in!"

"I'd like to see you try!"

She smirked, nodding to her two clones. "You heard'im!"

The two clones grinned widely, hefting their loads over their shoulders. "Okay!" With a loud grunt of effort, they swung them forward, intent on knocking the door open by force. The door shuddered and splintered slightly, but otherwise held its ground.

"Damn," Naruto grimaced.

"Well, I said it was pretty sturdy," Izumo muttered.
"It's not irreplaceable, is it?" she asked. The Chuunin shook his head. Sighing, she gestured one of the clones over towards her. Realizing instantly what she had it mind, it happily obliged and began gathering chakra together in her upturned palm.

"Boss...?" Udon snuffled curiously.

"What the hell is that...?" Kotetsu awed.

Naruto regarded the small blue orb in her hand. It was a bit sloppier than her last attempt, but good enough for her purposes. After all, all she wanted to do was knock down a set of doors. "All right," she exclaimed. "You better step away from the doors, Konohamaru, 'cuz I'm coming in! RASENGAN!!"

--

From his seat behind his grandfather's desk, Konohamaru's teary eyes widened in surprise as the two large doors blew apart, revealing a rather pissed off blonde standing in the doorway. "Boss..."

She glanced up, her eyes registering slight relief at the sight of him outside the blast range. "Konohamaru-kun..."

Realizing his eyes were still puffy and red and showing signs of tears, he turned away angrily, his face flushed in embarrassment. "I told you to go away!" he huffed. "Leave me alone!"

Naruto frowned at him as she crossed the floor to come and stand in front of the old oak desk. "I said I'd open the door, and I specifically remember somebody saying, 'I'd like to see you try...'" Her blue eyes bored into his back, making him twitch. "Are you trying to say that wasn't you?"

"Go away!" he snapped. "Only the Hokage's allowed in here!"

"I know that," she answered. "But she'd be bound to have a hard time getting in with somebody laying traps all around the door!"

Konohamaru snapped up and he faced her with a teary eyed snarl. "She's not the Hokage! My granddad's the Hokage!"

"Of course he is..." She paused, suddenly unsure of how to continue. "But... he's not here anymore and Konoha needs--"

"No!" Several books that had been sitting on the desk's edge were tossed to the floor. "They just wanna replace him! Everybody's gonna forget all about him!"

Ah-hah... "I'm not gonna forget about him." Dark teary eyes zeroed in on her face. "Are you gonna gonna forget about him?"

"Of course not..."

The blonde glanced back over her shoulder at the four standing out in the hall. "How 'bout you guys?"

"No."

"Uh-uh."

"Never!"
"Never ever!"

Nodding, Naruto turned her attention back towards the little boy in front of her. "Y'see? Six people! So that means nobody'll ever forget the Old Man 'cuz we'll always be around to remind'em!"

Konohamaru was silent a few moments. Snuffling slightly, he gazed back up at her with teary eyes. "You promise...?"

"You bet!" Naruto exclaimed. "I am, after all, the future Hokag--" The rest of her words were cut off as the boy scrambled down from his seat, around the desk, and into her arms with a loud sob. Uncertain of what to do, she mimicked Kakashi's actions at the hospital, patting his head gently. Before long, Moegi and Udon joined in the hug as well, while Kotetsu and Izumo looked on. "Don't you worry, Konohamaru-kun," she said softly. "Everything's gonna be just fine... I promise."

Konohamaru sniffled, nodding into her jacket. Waiting as he regained his composure, Naruto knelt down in front of him, smiling gently. "No more tears, okay?" she asked. "After all, I can't have my rival slacking off can I?"

"No way!" he exclaimed, flushing slightly at showing any weakness in front of his self-proclaimed rival. "I am gonna beat you one of these days!"

"You bet you are," she agreed. "When you become Nanadaime Hokage!"

Izumo and Kotetsu watched the scene, similar expressions of awe written on their faces. So this was the infamous Uzumaki Naruto? Defeater of Inuzukas, prodigal Hyuuga, and rampaging Bijuu?

Allowing the group a little privacy, and contemplating how to explain the ruined doors to the Godaime, Izumo stepped back out into the hall, Kotetsu following close behind. "She's something else, eh?"

"You bet," he agreed. "All that talk of bein' Hokage... given everything she's done, makes you wonder if she just might pull it off."

Izumo chuckled. "If she does, I'm sure hope I'm around to see it." He cast a look over his shoulder at the orange clad blonde, a grin spreading across his face. "Something tells me she's gonna be one hell of a ninja!"

~ End Chapter 29
A new mission for Team 7 provides some interesting introspection...

Chapter 30

Tsunade sat quietly behind the desk in her new chambers as the Chuunin before her read off his latest report. She let out a sigh as it drew to a close, her long, deceptively dainty fingers steepled in front of her.

Umino Iruka glanced up from the dossier in his hand, his scarred face very solemn. Taking a few steps forward, he set the document down on her desk so that she could peruse it at her own leisure. "So, you see the problem, Hokage-sama?"

The newly appointed Godaime Hokage nodded stoically. Taking the manilla envelope simply labeled 'SEVEN' in hand, she leafed through its pages with an ever increasing frown. "Well... I knew I had my work cut out for me with this job..."

"Tsunade-sama...?" Shizune, ever present by her side, queried softly. Tsunade handed her the folder and the dark medic paged through it, her frown slowly matching hers. "Oh... Naruto-san..."

Feeling protective of his old charge, Iruka stepped forward once more. "Naruto is not to blame for this..."

Amber eyes regarded him speculatively. "No one's blaming her... even if she is notorious for attracting trouble." Both Chuunin and Slug Mistress twitched, well aware of the blonde's penchant for shenanigans. "If anything I blame Sarutobi-sensei... Squad 7 is bad luck and everyone knows it..."

"Tsunade-sama," Shizune entreated. "Please don't say things like that... Surely something can be done..."

The Godaime paused, looking thoughtful. She'd suspected that things weren't as cozy as they should have been while hearing the blonde's depiction of her teammates back in Konoha, but once she'd met them with her own eyes she'd known for sure. History had a way of repeating itself after all... She'd yet to have an opportunity to discuss the matter with Kakashi, what with the village being in the state it was, but it was obvious that something had to been done. Team unity was integral to the success of missions, and if the members of Team 7 were experiencing problems...

"Do either of you have any suggestions?"

The two younger ninja paused, their expressions turning to deep thought as they struggled to come up with a solution. After all, the team had an extremely good mission success record - successfully completing a C turned A rank? - it would be terrible to have to split them up.

"My, my, my... the room is so tense! Don't tell me there's been an accident?"

Three heads shot up and turned towards the door, where a small elderly woman with pale blue eyes
stood with a wooden cane in hand.

"Miyako-sama?" Tsunade called out.

The old council woman smiled softly, turning her head in the sound of the Hokage's voice. "Tsunade-hime, it's a pleasure to hear your voice again."

"Likewise," the Hokage agreed, rising from her seat to greet the retired ninja. "How can I assist you today?"

Iwano Miyako smiled knowingly. "Well, I happened to hear some of your conversation as I was coming in, and I can't help but wonder if we couldn't possibly assist each other?"

---

Naruto dashed across the rooftops, vaulting over a couple of trees until she came towards the river. Executing a somersault that would put a gymnast to shame, she touched down on the bridge railing, tossing her teammates a jaunty wave. "G'morning, Team 7!" she crowed.

Sakura grinned, waving back whereas Saske quirked an eyebrow before going back to his normal brooding. Predictably, the blonde ignored him.

Glancing up from his Icha Icha Paradise, Kakashi regarded the blonde kunoichi with a curious crescent-eyed grin. "Well now," he drawled. "Aren't you the cheerful one?"

The blonde snapped her eyes towards him, eyes widening at the sight of him. "Ka-ka-ka-ka..."

The jounin cocked his head slightly. "Something wrong?"

Something wrong he said? Although she was well aware that she was abysmal at Genjutsu, she still couldn't believe her eyes. She pointed a finger at him, wide blue eyes incredulous. "You're not late!?"

Kakashi closed his eye in a grin. "Well, we do have a mission today."

Still coming to grips with his presence, Naruto didn't hear him. 'Okay... I left my house at 9... the meeting wasn't supposed to start 'til 9:30, but Sensei never shows up until 12...' She gripped her hair, letting out a frustrated wail that had her teammates taking a cautious step back. "Aaaaiiiiee!! It's the end of the world-- er, wait... what was that you said...?"


Predictably, the blonde immediately perked up, squealing excitedly. "Woohoo! Too cool! What are we doin'? Where are we goin'? What are we doin'?"

"We're going on an escort mission," he explained. "Remember though, we have to be extra-cautious considering the village's state right now. Other villages might perceive us as weak and unprotected."

The three genin nodded solemnly. Though so much had happened in such, only a few months had passed since the last Chuunin Exam and the subsequent war that followed. The Oto-Suna invasion had earned Konoha a lot of casualties, a majority of them high-level chuunin and jounin. Though relative peace existed between the five Shinobi Nations, villages like Iwa and Kumogakure wouldn't think twice about taking advantage of the situation if they thought the Leaf village was unable to defend itself. Because of that the remaining ninja had to work exceptionally harder,
taking on extra missions and duties just to show that Konoha was by no means weak.

Certain that his students understood, Kakashi continued on. "So, I want you all to head home and pack. Report back here in an hour. Understood?"

All three genin nodded, shouting out a unison "Ryoukai!" before vanishing from sight.

With them out of sight, Kakashi took to the nearest tree to await their return. Rather than continue reading about the ever-manly Ronin Jiro, his faithful squire Akira, and their continued attempts to woo the betrothed princess Tsukiko and the violently vivacious bandit Hinawari, the Copy ninja's thoughts went to the three students under his tutelage.

'Tutelage... that would suggest that you've actually taught them something...' Both Iruka and Jiraiya's harsh, but true words still echoed loudly in his mind.

~ "Have you forgotten, Kakashi? You were assigned three students, not one!" ~

~ "We all know you were given Sasuke for a reason, but you can't just ignore the other two, damn it!" ~

~ "You told me Orochimaru attacked your students in the Forest of Death. You made sure to seal off the Curse Mark left on the Uchiha, but didn't you check to see if anything strange had happened to the other two?" ~

Kakashi realized belatedly that with all the hecticness of the past few months, there hadn't been any time to debrief his students on the things that had happened to them. The invasion, Naruto, his, and Sasuke's fights with Itachi followed by their hospitalization, the blonde's training trip with Jiraiya; there was no doubt in his mind that the three of them had come to their own conclusions about what had occurred.

He recalled watching how the three had interacted amongst each other the last few days. Sakura hovered between her two teammates - although she did sometimes lean more towards Sasuke - as if she was afraid they were going to vanish in thin air. When they weren't paying attention, Naruto alternated gazing at the two of them with such a painfully relieved and guilty expressions that it made his heart hurt. And Sasuke...? Although Kakashi likened the boy to a younger version of himself, it was hard to tell what was going on in that Avenger head of his - a worrying thought indeed especially when taking his sealed Curse mark into consideration. It was no wonder they were walking on eggshells around other!

'Trouble is, what to do about it...?' Could he really in good conscience approach his students and divulge all the deep, dark, sordid secrets currently being kept from them? Could he tell his two little kunoichi that their teammate, courtesy of a rogue S-Rank criminal of their village, had been cursed with a mark that might potentially wear down and destroy his sanity? Could he tell his sole male student that his elder brother, responsible for the slaying of their entire clan, sought out not him, but his blonde teammate because of the not-quite-so-latent power sealed within her?

~ "No." ~ He remembered that confrontation a little ways up river... Had it been one month? Two? Uchiha Itachi had stood before him, still as calm and collected as ever, his crimson eyes revealing nothing about his thoughts or motives. ANBU had taught him well. ~ "We seek Yondaime-sama's Legacy..." ~

Legacy... the Sandaime's Law and his sensei's last wishes had kept him from revealing the secrets relating to the blonde, but was it really worth it? For years he had struggled with the idea of telling her the truth, and that desire had been stronger than ever when he learned she had been keeping a
secret of her own.

~ "You're the one who told me to 'see through deception', Kakashi-sensei! I thought you knew!" ~

Had he been doing his job properly, he would have. As it was, the blonde continued to do things that surprised him, both in her words and actions. Although it had been nearly a year since Team 7 had been formed, there were certain days when it felt like he didn't know Uzumaki Naru at all.

~ "I never go back on my word! It's part of my nindo - you know that, Kakashi-sensei!" ~

If he did anything at all on this trip, that was one thing he was certain to change.

"Ooooiizi, Kakashi-sensei!"

The Jounin glanced up, his eye creasing in his customary 'grin' as his three subordinates made their way towards him from the other side of the bridge. "Well, you three are back fast."

"Well, we can't keep our client waiting, can we?" Naruto exclaimed.

The kunoichi beside her nodded, fixing him with a slightly chiding look. "Although... we could have saved ourselves a lot of time if we'd known we were going on a mission before showing up this morning."

Kakashi himself had only received the mission that morning, but they didn't need to know that. He closed his eye in a grin once more. "But where's the fun in that?"

Both she and Naruto made a large show of rolling their eyes.

"Who are we escorting?" Sasuke asked, his face fixed in his usual bored expression. His teammates paid this no mind; however, Kakashi knew they would have had they been able to spot the discreet looks he kept giving Naruto.

'As if he expected her to transform into something else...' For what seemed like the hundredth time, Kakashi wished he had had the time to debrief his students. When all this tension came to a head - and it was going to, of this he had no doubt - it was going to end badly. Very badly.

Remembering that he had been asked a question, the jounin turned his attention back towards his students. Sensing the approaching chakra signatures, he grinned once more. "It's someone you're all familiar with, I'm sure." Opening his eye, he directed his gaze over their shoulders.

Predictably, all three genin turned, spotting the man and woman approaching them. The man, years younger than the woman he was obviously leading along, laughed loudly, the red tattoos lining his face crinkling in amusement. "Ah, ha-ha! Miyako-sama, you're a real class act!"

Naruto's grin nearly split her face in two. "Iwano-baasan!" she exclaimed.

"What? No hello for me?" Jiraiya asked, feigning hurt. "How cold..."

The blonde stuck out her tongue at him. "I just saw you a couple days ago, Ero-sennin! I haven't seen Iwano-baasan in forever!"

The white-haired sage twitched in annoyance at the crude nickname. "Didn't I say not to call me that!" His expression shifted into a grimace when the kunoichi only stuck out her tonguine once more with a loud 'Nyaaa!'. "Youth these days... no respect for their elders..."

Kakashi grinned in amusement.
Sakura blinked in confusion.

Sasuke regarded the blonde and Sannin with a grimace. 'Freaks..' he thought in mild annoyance. 'The both of them...!'

Iwano Miyako, Konoha Council spokeswoman and retired kunoichi, regarded the group for a few moments before letting out a delighted laugh. "Well," she exclaimed. "I can tell this is going to be an exciting trip!"

"Where exactly is it we're going, Iwano-sama?" Sakura asked as they made their way to the gates of the village.

The old woman grinned, her pale blue eyes shining in excitement. "To a wedding!"

All three genin stopped short, gaping in surprise. "Huh?"

"Iwano-baasan," Naruto exclaimed incredulously. "You're getting married?"

"Me?" Iwano laughed once more. "My gracious, no! My grandson Ryu is getting married. He and his family live in Tokushima, just outside of Tea Country."

"Our mission," Kakashi replied. "Is to escort Iwano-sama to Tokushima, provide guard detail during her time there, and then escort her back to Konoha. Everyone understand?" All three genin nodded. "Good. Any questions?"

Sasuke jabbed a thumb in Jiraiya's direction, his expression one of disinterest. "Why's he coming along?"

The old hermit sage grimaced at him in annoyance. 'Punk...' He gave Naruto a discreet glance before pasting a wide grin to his face. "I just so happen to enjoy attending weddings!"

Kakashi chuckled, shaking his head. "Always a bridesmaid, never a bride, eh, Jiraiya-sama?"

Iwano laughed out loud.

--

Unlike some of her colleagues, the elderly council woman was accustomed to travel on the road, allowing the group to make good time. As they made their trek, Jiraiya held the front of the line with the three genin of Team 7, recounting them with tales of exploits from his past adventures outside the village. Naruto listened to each tale with a humored smirk, no doubt questioning the truth behind his words while finding them amusing at the same time. Sakura alternated between being awed by the sage's knowledge and skill, and suspicious at his questionable character. Sasuke meanwhile merely looked bored and annoyed at the whole situation.

As if picking up on the emotions of all three, Iwano gazed in their direction from her position at the back of the group, lead gentlemanly along as she was by Kakashi. An amused smile spread across her aged face, her pale eyes twinkling knowingly. "Your students have grown since we met last," she commented.

Kakashi glanced up at the group, his eye softening slightly. "Yes..." he murmured. Pausing, he turned his gaze back to the woman walking alongside him. "This trip wouldn't happen to be another evaluation, would it, Iwano-sama?"

The old woman's smile widened. "An old woman like me has to have her interests," she answered.
"It just so happens that I like to follow up on the genin teams that impress me."

A smirk, hidden by his mask, spread across the jounin's face. "Glad to hear it."

"I take it they're doing well?"

As he attempted to answer her, Kakashi's statement was cut off by an outraged yell that came from Naruto's direction; no doubt as a result of something Sasuke had said. Sometimes he wondered why the blonde allowed him to antagonize her so and why the boy even bothered, but he supposed he already knew the answer. Instead of pondering the matter - it brought up too many undesirable memories - he merely watched as Sakura bopped her (lightly, he noted) over the head, reprimanding her for being loud as Jiraiya looked on with even louder boisterous laughter.

Once he was certain the altercation was over, he turned his attention back to the old woman. "This is our first official mission since the Exams," he explained.

"Yes..." Iwano's expression turned thoughtful. "Although I hear both your students made a good showing."

He nodded absently, recalling Naruto's fight with Kiba only to frown when he realized he never got around to asking her how her fight with Neji went. "Yeah..." he murmured, studying the blonde's back briefly. "But they're not ready to be Chuunin... not yet."

Iwano nodded. "The Council is only now acknowledging that Naruto-chan's abilities as a ninja can be an asset to the village."

He remembered reading through Iruka's notes that the Council had tried to bar the blonde's entrance into the Academy, fearing that teaching her ninjutsu would make her even more of a threat and liability. He wondered what had caused them to change their mind. "And they're not at all concerned by...?"

She snorted, her delicate face shifting into a grimace. "The concern is there," she admitted. "However, taking into consideration recent events and her brief time outside the village, they seem to be confident that Jiraiya-sama has the situation well in hand."

Of course... it hadn't taken long for everyone to learn of the Great Toad Sage's return to the village. However, he found it unsettling that the Council had been aware of Jiraiya's training of the blonde before him. Trying hard not to dwell on the guilt such a thought brought to the surface, he realized that it had been for the best. Not only had that training allowed her to keep a homicidal Jinchuuriki from leveling the village, it had somehow allowed her to convince one of Konoha's most brilliant and powerful ninja to return home and assume the title of Godaime.

Perhaps he could get the story behind that one during this trip.

"So," He studied the woman beside him keenly, well aware of the fact that despite her own personal views this woman was still a spokesperson of the Council. "You're here to evaluate Naruto, not Team 7."

Pale blue eyes glanced his way, deep and meaningful despite their inability to see. "Uzumaki Naruto has repeated the Academy three times and she graduated with the worst score in her class," She paused, glancing in the unaware blonde's direction. "Yet she was accepted onto a team by a Jounin who had up until then failed every other Genin team he had ever been assigned."

Kakashi had been prepared to fail this particular team as well, but had been surprised when they had passed his test. Granted, he was not about to tell her that.
Oblivious to his thoughts, Iwano went on, "The Council was suspicious... they viewed the girl as a threat to village safety simply because of what she is." She paused once more, grimacing at the ignorance her colleagues had displayed. "Until they were certain she could cause no harm, they restricted your team's movements, gathering more info until they could act."

The jounin's visible eye narrowed. While he had noticed that all his team's missions had been D-ranked within the village and its perimeter before their mission with Iwano, he hadn't ever given it much thought. After all, they were only rookie genin. However, it had him wondering what would have happened had the Council not found Iwano-sama's evaluation of Team 7 to be satisfactory? His gaze went to his other two students and he frowned. *They would have sacrificed Sakura and Sasuke's growth because they were scared of Naru...?*

He remembered Iruka's words outside the Hokage tower all those months ago...

~ "How do you expect them to protect him if they don't improve as well?" ~

He had three students to train. He needed to get back on track.

"So, am I to assume that your last evaluation convinced them otherwise?"

"Not entirely..." she answered. "Although it did convince them to permit you all to undertake that C-Rank mission to Nami."

At the mention of Nami, Kakashi remembered just how close they had all come to failing that mission. He also remembered the sickening feeling at the rush of the familiar, foul chakra and the look Naruto had given him on the bridge. If he could help it, he never wanted to see that expression on her face ever again.

Iwano-sama was still talking, a proud smile present on her face. "To be honest, it was Naruto-chan's ensuring the safe return of our new Hokage that did the trick." she said. "In fact, I heard she even saved her life!"

Now he was certain he had to get the full story. Kakashi glanced at Naruto once more, now laughing with Sakura. "But they still fear her..." he said solemnly.

The old woman's smile faded slightly. "Yes," she agreed with a small sigh. "But on the other hand they acknowledge that her strength can be used to protect Konoha and its interests." She paused, grimacing again. "They will try to block her path no longer..."

'*For now, at least..' he thought to himself. Shinobi were tools, after all. "So, was that the only reason for this trip, Iwano-sama?"

Opening her mouth to reply, Iwano was cut off by a delighted cry, courtesy of Naruto.

"Hey! I see a town!"

"Big deal... it's not like you've never seen one before..."

"Shut up, asshole!"

"Naruto..."

"He started it!"

"Moron..."
Iwano chuckled and then grinned. "Considering what you all have been through these last few months, I thought a vacation might be nice."

"Gaaahhh! Nobody wants to see your dirty books, you old pervert!"

"Naruto! Don't be so loud---yeeekk!!! Is that a---??"

"Put that AWAY, Ero-sennin!!"

"Sakura... get off of me..."

"I TOLD you not to call me that!!"

Kakashi closed his eye in a grin. "A vacation, hmmm? Sounds nice..."

--

The group reached town in record time, the three genin openly marveling at all the people bustling about. Iwano, now being guided along by Jiraiya, called the group to a stop with a satisfied smile on her face. "Well done, Team 7! We're making excellent time!"

"We're stopping here for the night, I take it?" Kakashi asked.

She nodded excitedly. "There's a wonderful inn nearby that will accommodate us very nicely."

"Good to hear," Jiraiya replied. He paused, grinning at a group of women that passed by. "They wouldn't happen to have hot springs by any chance, would they?"

At this, Naruto and Sakura fixed the sage with a glare whilst Sasuke rolled his eyes.

"Why yes, I believe they do." she answered. The Toad Sage let out a delighted chortle.

'Pervy old goat,' Naruto thought derisively.

Unaware of her thoughts, Inner Sakura was in complete agreement. Was this guy really supposed to be one of the Densetsu no Sannin? *WHAT THE HECK IS THIS FREAK'S DEAL? HOW ON EARTH DID NARU PUT UP WITH HIM?? I'D HAVE STRANGLED HIM WEEKS AGO, SHAAAAA!!!*

Sasuke struggled vainly to ignore them all, a slightly twitching brow the only sign of his consternation. "...Idiots..." he muttered.

Before long, the group came upon the inn Iwano had described. After setting their belongings down in the rooms the councilwoman had generously procured, they all took a brief tour of the grounds, stopping briefly to admire the bath house - complete with hot springs just as she had describe.

"Oh wow..." Sakura breathed, her expression bright in admiration. "This is great! Just what we need after a long day of walking!" As she spoke, two older girls in bath robes passed by her and out to the springs, earning another grin and delighted giggle from Jiraiya. She glanced back over her shoulder at him, grimacing in distaste. 'Ugh... no way... he's not really gonna--'

Before Jiraiya could make any move to follow after them - or set up a secure hiding place somewhere to spy on them - Naruto grabbed him by his ponytail, eliciting a high-pitched yelp. "Oi! Where do you think you're going, you old lech?"
Jiraiya snatched his hair out of her grip, making a face at her. "I was just going to escort Miyako-sama to her room," he answered, trying to maintain a dignified tone. "And then perhaps join her in some tea."

Iwano's pale eyes lit up. "Oh, that sounds wonderful, Jiraiya-kun!" she exclaimed. "How thoughtful of you!" With that, she held out her hand, allowing the younger ninja to escort her away.

"Of course," he grinned and started off down the hall - not without glancing back over his shoulder to make a rude face, of course.

Naruto watched him go, exasperated. "Sheesh... he's like a big kid!"

Sakura gave her a slanted look. "It's no wonder you two get along so well..."

"Wha...?" Blue eyes blinked in confusion and then indignation. "I'm nothing like that old goat!"

Her pink-haired teammate laughed. "Touch touchy! You know I'm only teasing, right?"

"Moouuuu, Sakura-nee-chan!"

Sakura giggled again. "Anyway, how's about that bath?"

"All right," Naruto paused, glancing over at their two male teammates. "Are you guys coming?"

Kakashi blinked.

A startled flush spread across Sasuke's face before he recovered, looking away with a frown. "Yeah right."

The blonde blinked.

Her teammate blushed in mortification, bopping the blonde over the head once more. "Naruto!" she cried out. "They can't come! They're guys, remember?"

Naruto cocked her head. "Yeah... but there are partitions, aren't there...?"

Sasuke snorted, still embarrassed at his involuntary reaction to her comment. "There isn't a wall thick enough..."

The blonde scowled at him, opening her mouth to retort before a thought came to her. She glanced away, allowing a mischievous smirk to spread across her face. "Aww, don't worry, ya jerk," she replied. "I know a jutsu that might be useful to you at a time like this."

Their jounin sensei quirked a brow in curiosity. "Hm?"

Refusing to allow his own curiosity to show, the Uchiha merely smirked. "A useful jutsu? From you?" he snorted. "I doubt it."

The blonde kunoichi's smirk remained. "Just get those pinwheels of yours ready and prepared to be amazed, asshole..." she snorted. "This is the only freebie you're getting from me."

Sasuke considered this briefly. He could admit to at least to himself that he was curious about the blonde's abilities. If she was so willing to show them off, the least he could do was humor her...

Letting out a disinterested snort, he focused chakra to his eyes to activate his Sharingan. "Hn, take your best shot."
If it were possible, Naruto's smirk widened, showing off a hint of a pointed incisor. "All right," she began. "Here come's Uzumaki Naru's first ever original jutsu..."

Sakura jerked, snapping her head to her fellow kunoichi with a horrified gasp. "Naruto, don't you dare---!"

"Henge! OIROKE NO JUTSU!" The small blonde vanished in a poof of smoke, only to be replaced by the ever buxom and vivacious Naruko, grinning cheekily amidst her scantily arranged whisps of smoke. "Well," she purred in a sultry voice, focusing smoky blue eyes at the pale faced boy in front of her. "Whaddya think, Sasuke-kunnnn?"

Suddenly there was a flash of movement, followed by a loud yelp, and a poof of smoke as Naruto let go of the transformation in order to duck another swing from Sakura. "Gaaahh! Neechan!"

The pink-haired kunoichi loomed over her dangerously, green eyes flashing with the promise of violence. "NARUTOOOOOOO...!!!!!" With lightning fast reflexes, she grabbed the blonde by the back of her collar and dragged her away.

"Aaaaieeee!!! Have mercy, Neechan! Have mercyyyyy!!!"

Sasuke watched the pair vanish around a corner before ducking his face into his collar - a weak attempt to hide the high spots of pink upon his cheeks. He closed his eyes, his brow twitching madly. "Moron..."

Sliding his hitai-ate discreetly down back over his eye, Kakashi allowed a bead of sweat to roll down his face as he vaguely wondered if it would be too much to ask for the floor to swallow him up. To think that... whatever *that* was... was the first original jutsu she had ever created. 'It explains a lot...' he told himself. It was no wonder she'd always had such an easy time escaping capture after carrying out pranks in the village... And here he'd said he wanted to get to know more about his blonde subordinate... 'When I said I needed to get to know you better, that is *not* what I meant...'

Risking a glance over at his remaining subordinate, he watched as a still red-faced Sasuke took a discreet swipe at his nose, cursing his under his breath. 'I suppose when you're involved, Naruto, we all should be more careful what we ask for... You're not called Konoha's most Unpredictable Ninja for nothing.' Holding back a laugh, he turned on his heel and walked away.

The thought of having... what did she call it... Sexy no Jutsu a part of his thousand-plus jutsu repertoire...? Kakashi shuddered at the thought.

Perhaps their rooms had a private bath where he could wash his eyes out...

--

Sakura sank down into the steaming waters of the hotspring, letting out a loud sigh of contentment. "Ohhhh... this feels wonderful - it's just what I needed!" She glanced up at at the closed shoji leading inside to the changing rooms. "Come on out, Naru!" she called. "The water's great!"

"Promise you're not gonna hit me?" came the muffled call from inside.

The pink-haired kunoichi twitched slightly, remembering the prank the blonde had pulled earlier. Really! Oiroke no jutsu on her poor Sasuke-kun?! What was she thinking?!

Taking a deep breath, she sighed before replying, "Yes, Naru, I promise... even though you problem deserve anothHOher hit for that prank of yours..." **HOW DARE SHE FLASH OUR
The door slid open and out stepped the blonde with a wide grin on her face. "It was so worth it though!" she exclaimed, chortling mischievously. "Did you see the look on his face?" Oh she wished she could have gotten a picture!

Sakura merely shook her head with a small smirk. "Goofball..."

The blonde snickered, molding chakra to her feet as she walked casually across the water's surface. "Oh, c'mon, Neechan... like you've never wanted to prank anybody before!"

Wading over towards her, Sakura glanced up at her teammate with a wide grin. "You mean like this?" Grabbing the blonde's ankle, she gave a quick tug, yanking her beneath the surface with loud yelp. Naruto resurfaced a second later, sputtering. "Gotcha!"

"Moouuuu..." The blonde shook her head, spraying her teammate with water.

Sakura squealed, trying to shield herself to no avail. Once it was safe, she took the moment to give her teammate a once over. Although she hadn't commented on it before, Naruto looked a lot different than the last time they'd spent one on one time together. Without the garishly bright orange jacket encompassing her small frame, it was easier to pick out the blonde's more feminine attributes. She cast a brief look at the area just below her shoulders, noting with a slight grimace that the she and her teammate definitely varied in terms of size.

'Figures...' she thought to herself. 'The tomboy would have bigger boobs than me...!' Deciding not to be bitter - after all, both Ino and Hinata were chestier than her as well - she turned her attention to the sopping blonde locks now hanging low around the blonde's shoulders. "Your hair's gotten longer..."

"Hm?" The blonde blinked, pushing her bangs out of her eyes. "That's what Lee said."

"Oh?" Naruto had seen Lee since returning? Sakura immediately found her curiosity piqued. "Is that all he said?"

Naruto paused, confused at this particular line of questioning. Why was what Lee said about her hair so important? "Uhh... he said it looked youthful."

Her teammate's face fell slightly. 'That's it...? Drat!' Refusing to be deterred, she tried another tactic. "Oh yeah? Then what did he say about your visit to him in the hospital before the Exams?"

"Um... it didn't come up..." She paused, a slight pink flush spreading across her cheeks that couldn't be blamed on the water's heat. "Wait, he knew it was me?" She clearly remembered being under a Henge. How was it he had found out? And why was it he hadn't said anything when they last met?

"Gai-sensei told him," Sakura answered, studying her face to gauge her reaction. Her own expression turned speculative. "The question is, why didn't you?"

The blonde scratched her head, letting out a nervous chuckle. "I dunno..." she admitted. "Guess it doesn't matter anyway..." That moment outside of the hospital came to mind, bringing the blonde up short. She'd just convinced Lee to return to his room to rest, supporting his weight as they made their way back inside the building. He'd let out a soft, almost contented yawn, shifting and allowing his head to loll to the side until it rested upon hers. The action had been so unexpected, but kind of... nice... He inhaled deeply, and she remembered almost letting out a smile at the sleepy smile that spread across his face until he spoke.
~ "Strawberries" ~ he murmured.

~ "Strawberries" ~ The two nurses accompanying them had been just as confused as she was.

~ "The scent of strawberries" ~ He closed his eyes with a sigh. ~ "Just like Sakura-chan," ~

It was to be expected - especially considering the rigorous cleaning her hair had undergone with Sakura's strawberry scented shampoo - but it a strange sort of way, it kinda hurt. For the life of her, Naruto couldn't figure out why.

Realizing that she still had her teammate's attention, she forced the memory down, letting out an embarrassed chuckle. "It's not like I'm exactly a girly girl..."

"No," Sakura agreed, puzzling over the brief subdued expression that flitted across the blonde's face. "Masquerading as a boy for 6 years will do that..." She paused, smirking lightly. "Still, you've got most of us beat in the Girl Department already!" Naruto blinked in confusion. "You've already kissed our Sasuke-kun!"

Remembering how furious the Uchiha fanclub had been that fateful day, the blonde paled, waving her hands in front of herself frantically. "That was an accident!" she exclaimed. "Somebody pushed me from behind!

That was how it had happened? After getting to know the blonde a little better, Sakura eventually realized that Naruto would never have willingly kissed Sasuke... *SHE WAS MORE THAN WILLING TO FLASH HIM WITH THAT PRANK JUTSU OF HERS!* Inner Sakura muttered sullenly.

"Well, it was probably Ami..." she mused aloud, although she was well aware of the fact that she and Ino had been engaged in a shoving war just behind the pair. She ignored that thought, letting out a wistful sigh. "Still... you're so lucky!" The blonde cocked her head in confusion. "That was your first kiss, ne?"

"I guess..." The blonde frowned. "If you count banging your teeth together after being shoved in each other's faces a kiss..." Another moment came to mind, making the pink flush across her cheeks even more pronounced. "The second one was a lot nicer..."

Green eyes widened in surprise. "Whaaa...?" This was news to her! "When? With who?"

Blue eyes glanced at her before going back to the water's surface. "With Haku..." she answered softly. "Not long after we first met." She remembered the exact moment, the pale boy's face moving forward to meet hers, his brown eyes soft as he gave her a knowing smile. "He said he was glad that we'd met..."

Well it explained why the blonde had been so flustered when she'd found her alone in that forest clearing. "And then he kissed you...?"

"I told him that I was a girl and he said that he already knew..." the blonde replied, her blue eyes slightly unfocused as she recalled the memory. It had been strange to think that a stranger had been able to see through her disguise so easily, but also comforting in that he didn't seem to mind at all. "Then he leaned forward and..." She blushed, remembering how different this kiss was from the one with Sasuke. For the briefest of moments, Naruto had felt like she hadn't had to hide anything... that for just that moment it was alright to just be Uzumaki Naru, not Naruto. "It was... nice..."
"Nice?" Sakura grinned at the expression on the blonde's face. "It had to be better than nice with the way you're blushing." Predictably, the blonde's cheeks reddened even further. The pink-haired kunoichi paused, giving her a look. "You had a crush on him, didn't you?"

"I dunno..." she murmured thoughtfully. "How do you know when you have a crush on someone?"

"How do you know...?" The pink-haired kunoichi blinked in surprise. Didn't she know? Gazing at the puzzled expression on the blonde's face, Sakura supposed she didn't. She paused, thoughtfully considering. "Well... let's see... You meet someone who you think is interesting... whether you think they're brave, or smart, or kind... you like spending time with this person and you're happy, excited, whenever they're near. You want to do whatever you can for this person to keep them happy... because when they're sad, you're sad too..."

Silent for several minutes, Naruto thought about her teammate's explanation, remembering a conversation several months back and Sakura's attempts to explain her feelings for Sasuke.

~ "I know, but... I know there's more to him than that. He acts so cold, but I've seen moments where he was gentler... kinder..." ~

~ "I know deep down he's really lonely. It's not fair that he should have to become an Avenger... he shouldn't have to push everyone away just to achieve his goal! "We're his teammates aren't we? We're supposed to help each other!" ~

"Is that how *you* feel...?"

Sakura paused for the briefest of moments but giving a small nod.

Was that really what a crush was...? She wasn't sure she could attribute her own feelings - or Sakura's really - to such a simple word. She had cared about Haku, of course - he'd become one of her most precious people despite the short amount of time they'd known each other. Though she didn't know all that much about him, she'd felt a sort of connection to him.

~ "I never thought that I would meet another person who understood... who shared my pain..." ~

She remembered his pain-filled smile. In her fury she'd done him so much damage... and yet he still... ~ "Talking with you also made me happy... but I was sad at the same time knowing what I would have to do..." ~

She remembered the pain she'd felt at being responsible for his death, but the guilt had faded when she finally came to understand his motives. Was feeling that strongly for a person really a crush, or something deeper? Although she cared deeply for all her precious people, would she ever feel like that for another individual again? She wasn't sure.

"I feel that way..." Naruto said finally, her expression thoughtful. "About all my precious people..."

Sakura watched the expressions flitting across her face before sighing and letting a smile spread across her face. "That's just fine." she answered soothingly. She paused, her expression turning slightly teasing. "Maybe you're just too young for a boyfriend..."

A boyfriend? "Whaaa..?" The rest of her teammate's statement caught up to her brain, causing her to redden in embarrassment. "I am not little!"

Her teammate laughed out loud. "I said 'young', not 'little'!" she giggled, splashing water in her direction. "Though you are a little on the small side..."
"Moouuuu! Neeechaannnn!"

Unbeknownst to the two kunoichi splashing at each other in the women's side of the bath, Sasuke rose from his seated position by the wall dividing their baths, stalking to the edge before leaving the water entirely. "I'm going in," he muttered, before slamming the shoji door shut.

Kakashi watched the boy go with a curious look before turning back to the pages of Icha Icha. Yes... he certainly had his work cut out for him...

~End Chapter 30
Chapter 31: Kimono

Chapter Summary

Naruto watched them disappear into the house proper, still blinking owlishly. "What just happened?"

Kakashi gazed down at her, his eye creasing into a grin. "I think you just got recruited as a model."

~ Chapter 31

The group's brief stop at the inn went off without a hitch and the following morning found them all on the road again one more. After a few hours of light conversation (and a few minor skirmishes - it was Team 7, after all) and steady walking, they found themselves in the midst of a bustling village. Merchant wagons and people loaded with boxes and boxes of decorations seemed to zoom back and forth in every direction.

Naruto regarded the sight with wide eyes. "Wow..."

Iwano, with a slim hand on the blonde's smaller shoulder, smiled in amusement. "I take it we've arrived?" she asked.

"Are you sure this is the place, Iwano-sama?" Sakura asked, looking around in bewilderment. This place looked like a zoo! "What's going on? Some sort of a festival?"

The elder councilwoman grinned, her head craning slightly at all the noises around her. "It's a madhouse, I suppose...?" She tsked slightly. "Oh dear... I knew she'd take it too far..."

"Who would take what too far, Iwano-sama?" Kakashi asked.

She opened her mouth to respond, only to be cut off by someone calling her name.

"Miyako-sama?" A young dark haired boy in his teens approached the group, holding a large folded up banner in his arms. At the sight of the older woman, a surprised smile spread across his face. "We didn't expect you until the wedding!"

"Well, I suppose it's a good thing I decided to arrive earlier," she chuckled, turning her head to listen to the hustle and bustle going on around them. If the noise level was anything to go by, she had arrived just in the nick of time. "Isamu-kun, has Megumi-chan wrangled the whole town into her schemes?"

"Just about..." Isamu answered abashedly. "Of course, we're all happy to help." A wide grin spread across his face. "After all, it's not everyday something like this happens!"

Naruto cocked her head in curiosity. "People don't have weddings here?"

Behind her, her teammates let out a groan at the ridiculousness of that question.
Isamu chuckled. "This isn't any ordinary wedding," he answered. "Certainly not when there're celebrities involved."

The Copy Ninja cocked an eyebrow, "Celebrities?"

"Oh yes," Iwano answered, continuing her way down the street as calmly as she would in Konoha. Apparently she was well acquainted with this town. "My grandson is a clothing designer. I hear his latest line is very popular right now."

"Oh? What's your grandson's name?"

"Ryu. He took his mother's maiden name when his work gained popularity, so most people know his as--"

Sakura let out a loud gasp, snatching her pack off of her back as she rapidly began digging through its contents. Her fellow kunoichi regarded her with curious eyes. "Neechan?"

After a few more seconds, the pink haired kunoichi finally pulled out the object of her search, a glossy fashion magazine. Ignoring the curious stares of her teammates, Sakura redirected her attention to their client, a solemn expression on her heart-shaped face. "Iwano-sama," she murmured softly. "Is your grandson by any chance Shirotsuki Ryu?"

"Yes, that's my little Ryu," she answered, oblivious to the young girl's spasmodic twitch. Sasuke took a step back while Naruto regarded her with mounting concern. "I hear that he's very talented."

Sakura twitched again before letting out a loud, excited squeal that had both of her teammates taking another step back in alarm. "Kyyaahhh! I can't believe it!" Clutching the magazine to her chest she hopped up and down gleefully as Inner-Sakura crowed in victory. *WAIT 'TIL INO-PIG HEARS ABOUT THIS... SHE'S GONNA BE SOOO JEALOUS! SHAAAA!*

"You know Iwano-baasama's grandson, Neechan?" Naruto asked from her position behind Sasuke. Realizing this as she spoke, the Uchiha glared, stepping away from her as if he expected her to jump out of her clothes at any given second.

Her fellow kunoichi stared at her incredulously before pausing as a realization came to her. 'That's right...' she murmured to herself. 'Nar's always acted like a boy so she never would've paid attention to the latest fashions...' A smile spread across her face. "I know of him," she corrected, holding out the magazing for their perusal. Only the blonde stepped forward, peering curiously down at the glossy picture showing a dark haired young man with glasses standing beside a redhead woman modeling an elaborately designed kimono. "Shirotsuki Ryu is really popular right now in a lot of celebrity circles because his designs are so intricate and detailed. Some people say he's an artistic genius!"

Iwano smiled at the young girl's praise. "We're all very proud of him," she answered.

Naruto studied his picture, noting the familial resemblance, before turning her attention to the young woman beside him. "Who's that?" she asked.

"Hm?" Sakura looked down at the photo. "That's Ito Kanae - she's an up and coming actress who was Ryu-san's top model at his last show."

Jiraiya and Kakashi were standing behind them now, surveying the picture with a critical eye. 'Hm... quite the looker.'

Ignoring them, Sakura read the small caption below the photo. "It says here that she just finished
filming her first leading role... and is looking forward to their upcoming nuptials...?!" Her eyes boggling comically, she turned her attention to Iwano once more. "Ito Kanae and your grandson are getting married?!

"That's right," Isamu replied. "They met while Ryu-sempai was doing costume design for Fumikaze Yukie's first leading role in an action movie."

"Ahh," Jiraiya nodded sagely. "Pretty girl." He turned his gaze to Kakashi, a sly grin spreading across his face. "Word has it Fumikaze's signed on to star in the *Icha Icha* movie."

Kakashi's visible eye widened in delighted shock. "Are you serious? They greenlighted it?!

Sakura fixed both of them with a disapproving glare before turning her attention back to the boy. "You were saying?"

"Oh... well... Kanae-san was playing a minor role but, she and Ryu-sempai really connected."

"Wow," Naruto remarked. "How long ago was that?"

"Exactly 6 years ago from next Thursday."

Iwano's face lit up with a bright smile. "Ryu-kun!"

Everyone turned towards the pale, dark haired young man standing behind them; he had deep blue eyes and wore silver, wire rim glasses. Spotting the older Council woman among the group, he grinned back, embracing her warmly. "Obaasan! You're here early!"

"I've finally found myself escorts that can keep up with me!" she laughed, turning towards Kakashi. "Ryu-kun, this is Konoha's Squad 7; Jounin Sensei Hatake Kakashi, genin Haruno Sakura, Uchiha Sasuke, and Uzumaki Naruto." All four bowed in greeting. "Accompanying them is the Toad Sage Jiraiya of the Legendary Three Ninja."

Ryu smiled, greeting them with a low bow. "You honor us all with your visit," he replied. "Thank you so much for getting my grandmother here safely." He paused, a small grin making its way across his face. "I hope she didn't give you too much trouble."

"No way!" Naruto grinned back. "Iwano-baasama's loads of fun! She's one of the coolest old ladies I know--ow, Neechan!"

Sakura pulled back her fist, chuckling at Ryu nervously. "What Naruto means is that it was our pleasure..."

"Oh my stars! What is this?"

Again, all 3 genin froze, turning their attention towards the gate of a traditionally styled Japanese home bearing the name Iwano. At the entrance stood a short, plump middle-aged woman with graying black hair. Her light brown eyes zeroed in on Naruto, widening in surprise. Uncomfortable with such open and blatant scrutiny, the small blonde shifted uneasily.

The woman took a deep breath before closing the distance between them. "You are... absolutely ADORABLE!!"

Both Sasuke and Sakura keeled over.

Naruto gazed back at her, blue eyes blinking in complete bafflement. "Ehh...?"
"Mother?" Kakashi asked Ryu. The young groom-to-be nodded, a chagrined expression his face.

Oblivious to their exchange, the woman let out an excited laugh as she gazed at the little genin in front of her. "That pretty blonde hair, those blue eyes, those chubby cherubic cheeks--"

'Chubby??' Naruto puzzled.

"Oooh, I could just gobble you up!!"

Isamu coughed into his hand to smother his laugh at the expression that skirted across the young blonde's face.

"You must model for us!" the woman exclaimed excitedly, taking Naruto's startled hands into her own. "I can already envision so many ideas for you!"

"Eerrr..." Naruto turned to the others, her expression screaming 'help me!' in loud capital letters.

Taking pity on her, Kakashi stepped forward, his eye creased in his usual laidback expression. "My apologies, Iwano-san, but Naruto---"

The woman paused, a pout making its way across her plump face. "Ah, yes, I understand... You are a ninja, yes? Duty comes first." She released the blonde's hands, letting out a sigh.

Ryu glanced over at her.

"Well," Iwano-sama exclaimed. "You all will be staying to escort me back to Konoha, yes?" She turned in the other woman's direction, smiling indulgently. "I'm sure it would be perfectly all right for you to design something for Uzumaki-kun and Haruno-san to wear at the wedding--" At her excited gasp, she added, "Provided it's work-functional, of course."

The woman's eyes lit up in excitement once more and Naruto resisted the urge to hide behind Sasuke once more. "What a wonderful idea!" the woman gushed. "Of course, we'll have to get measurements so that we can get started right away!"

"After they get settled in, of course," Ryu cut in, sensing that his mother was well on her way into another frenzy. He loved his mother dearly, of course, but when Iwano Megumi got going... "Plus, I'm sure you'd like to catch up with Obaasan. So much has happened since we last saw her."

The woman had the good grace to blush before she stepped forward and took the elder Iwano's hands in her own. "Of course!" she gushed. "Oh, Hahaue, I've so much to tell you! And you must tell me how Konoha is doing..." With that the two women walked away, the younger of the two chattering excitedly.

Naruto them disappear into the house proper, still blinking owlishly. "What just happened?"

Kakashi gazed down at her, his eye creasing into a grin. "I think you just got recruited as a model."

"Ehhhhh??!"

"Isn't it exciting?" Sakura squealed. *JUST WAIT 'TIL WE GET BACK! I'M SOO RUBBING THIS ININO-PIG'S FACE! SHAAA!*

"B-b-but..."

Ryu chuckled softly at the blonde's expression. It seemed as though she was out of her element.
"Forgive my mother, Uzumaki-san," he said softly. "She's been retired from the clothing industry for several years now, but once she gets inspired by something..." He paused, glancing out the window at the flurry of activity still going on outside. "Well, she tends to get a little carried away..."

"Let me guess," Jiraiya grinned. "She's in charge of the wedding...?"

The young man nodded. "It's been a little hectic," he admitted, although judging by the expression on his face 'hectic' didn't begin to cover it. "But maybe a little side project will calm her down some..." He turned his attention back to Naruto, his expression becoming apologetic, yet hopeful. "You don't mind, do you, Uzumaki-san?"

Naruto opened her mouth to answer but was cut off by a grinning Sakura. "Of course she doesn't!" she exclaimed excitedly. "This is gonna be great! Ne, Naru-kun?"

"Err... yeah..."

Jiraiya and Kakashi remained silent, studying the blonde before exchanging a look.

---

"Kyaaaaaa!" Sakura's green eyes widened in awe at the sight before. A deep blue silk kimono with silver thread embroidered to look like peacock feathers around the sleeve hems lay neatly folded within a glass case before her. "This is gorgeous!"

Iwano Megumi took a sip from her tea, smiling indulgently. "You like it? I made that when I was about your age, dear."

"It's soo beautiful," Sakura sighed, a starry eyed expression on her face. "Your designs are so beautiful, Megumi-san! I can see where Ryu-san gets his talent."

"Oh, you're way too kind, dear!"

Iwano Miyako chuckled, waving a hand absently in her daughter-in-law's direction. "Don't be silly, Megumi-chan," she said. "You practically live on praise!"

Megumi flushed and then giggled. "Oh, I do not, Hahaue!" she exclaimed. "I am retired, aren't I! Ryu handles the business now - very well, in fact!"

The pink haired genin turned to her, eyes light in curiosity. "You seem to still enjoy your trade, Megumi-san," she mused. "Why is it that you retired? If you don't mind my asking, that is..."

The younger Iwano woman sighed. "To be honest, dear... when my dear husband passed, I couldn't find it in me to create anything... I was in mourning I suppose. I am so thankful for Ryu, though... he took up my role in my absence and did so well! And it's a good thing he did, too - otherwise he might not have met Kanae-chan!"

"Where is Kanae-chan?" Miyako asked.

"She should be on her way," Megumi answered. "She had a press conference and had to take a trip to Mikazuki-jima."

"Crescent Moon Island?" Sakura asked. "Why so far?"

Megumi nodded. "The prince of the Land of the Moon, Honourable Michiru the First, saw
Fumikaze-san's last movie and liked it so much that he hired the entire cast to reenact it for his son's birthday party."

Nearly choking on a dango mid-bite, Naruto gaped up at them in shock. "Some guy bought an entire movie cast?! He's that loaded?!"

"More like rented, but yes..." Megumi answered. "The Land of the Moon is very, very wealthy I've heard..."

"Wow..." Sakura awed. "It must be difficult for Ryu-san..." She paused, recalling the picture of him and his fiance. There was no mistaking the look of love for the redhead standing beside him. She let out a dreamy sigh. "I can tell he really cares for Kanae-san - it's gotta be hard not having her here."

His mother nodded, setting set down her teacup with a soft sigh. "I imagine they're both accustomed to it, their careers being what they are..." she murmured. "But you know how the saying goes... 'Love endures'..."

The pink haired kunoichi resumed her seat beside Megumi, letting out a dreamy sigh.

Naruto merely cocked her head slightly, eyes squinting in confusion. Before she could ponder the statement out loud, the shoji to the sitting room slid open, revealing Sasuke who quickly stepped inside and slid the door shut. Stalking towards the low table, he sat down tersely between his two female teammates without uttering a word.

Both Naruto and Sakura blinked at him in confusion. 'He's even more tense than normal...' Sakura frowned slightly. "Sasuke-kun? What's wrong?"

Once again the door slid open, revealing two young identical women with raven black hair and dark blue eyes, tittering amongst each other excitedly. Looking to be around the age of 16 or 17, they each wore matching intricately embroidered furisode, one in green and the other in red, with an elaborately tied golden obi.

Hearing their voices, Iwano Miyako smiled warmly. "Aaahh, I see the girls have finally decided to come visit their poor grandmother!"

Both girls looked up, squealing excitedly as they rushed over, simultaneously kissing her on the cheek. "Obaasan!"

"How are you, Obaasan?"

"You're here so early!"

"How are things in Konoha?"

"Everything's fine, my dears," the old council woman laughed. "Goodness you're all so energetic today!"

"Well," Green twin giggled excitedly. "It's not every day that our big brother gets married! I'm so excited!"

"Yes, yes!" Red twin agreed. "So many people are arriving for the big day! Just now we spotted the cutest--" She stopped as she gazed around the room, her blue eyes zeroing on Sasuke, who was pointedly looking away. She froze, grabbing her sister by the sleeve. "Michiko, look!"
The other girl blinked, following her gaze with an excited gasp. "There he is, Mitsuko!"

The Uchiha twitched. Naruto and Sakura blinked in unison. "Huh?"

"Isn't he so handsome?"

"Such pale features..."

"Such dark eyes..."

"And such lovely hair!"

'Lovely?' At this Naruto had to hold back a snort of laughter. Studying the two older girls currently making eyes at the boy who was doing a poor imitation of a stone statue, she was instantly reminded of their days back at the Academy. Nearly all of the girls in their class had squealed and fell over each other trying to get the sullen boy's attention. Although she imagined it was rather annoying having the attention of so many people when all you really wanted was to be left alone, the blonde had to admit the whole situation was rather hilarious. After all, ho knew that the jerk could pull older fangirls as well?

The two older girls went on, oblivious to her amusement, Sakura's growing displeasure, and Sasuke's sullen frustration. "Ooh, I could just squeeze him~!"

When one of the girls looked as if she was going to act on that statement, the young Uchiha scowled, only to tense slightly with Sakura edged a little closer to him. Glancing at her out of the corner of his eyes, he was a little surprised to find the pink haired girl fixing the two older girls with a disapproving frown.

"Now, now," Miyako intervened. "I'll have to ask you not to harrass my body guard. Duty comes first, after all..."

Michiko sat back with a pout on her face. "The cute ones are always ninja..." she sighed.

Mitsuko nodded in agreement with a matching look of disappointment that slowly became thoughtful. "Though he is a bit young..." she consented.

'4 years young, at least!' Sakura thought angrily, keeping her expression polite and even. *KEEP YOUR CLAWS OFF MY SASUKE-KUN! SHAA!*

"True, true, Mitsuko... Suppose he has an older brother?"

All three genin tensed, no one uttering a word.

Before a tense atmosphere could spread over the room, Isamu entered with a wide grin on his face. "Everyone! Come quick!"

"Isamu-kun... is something wrong?"

"Isamu-kun... is something wrong?"

The young boy shook his head, his grin widening even further. "Kanae-san is home!"

---

Following Isamu back outdoors, they spotted a large crowd of people surrounding a young woman with light red hair hanging over her left shoulder in a neat half-plait. She greeted and laughed with everyone around, her green eyes sparkling warmly even as she scanned the crowds for a familiar
Megumi stepped forward, her eyes lighting up happily at the sight of her future daughter-in-law. "Kanae-chan!"

The redhead turned, smiling brightly as she waved a greeting. "Megumi-obasan!"

"Now, now," the older woman weaved her way through the parting crowd, hugging the young woman tightly. "You must start calling me kaasan! We're practically family!"

Kanae blushed prettily, nodding her head in agreement. "Y-yes!"

Mitsuko shook her head with a heavy sigh. "Mother is so dramatic..." she exclaimed.

Michiko nodded her head in agreement. "Isn't she?"

Sakura fixed them both with a slight frown, huffing lightly in annoyance. 'Well, isn't that the pot calling the kettle black...' Sasuke glanced over at her but didn't say anything.

---

"...And just wait until you see all the decorations we've set up for you!" Megumi exclaimed, leading Kanae back into the Iwano estate. "Ooohhh, you're going to adore them!"

Kanae smiled. "I know they're going to be wonderful, Obasan," she agreed as they re-entered the sitting room. Pausing, she glanced around briefly. "Is Ryu-kun here...?"

Miyako smiled knowingly. "Just a moment..." A few seconds after they all resituated themselves, the shoji slid open again and Ryu stepped in, his eyes immediately meeting those of his fiancee.

The woman's eyes lit up and she jumped to her feet. "Ryu-kun!"

"Kanae!" Hugging her close, he kissed her briefly before meeting her gaze with a warm smile once more. "How was your trip?"

"Wonderful," she answered. "Mikazuki is a very lovely place. But..." Lowering her eyes briefly, she blushed warmly. "I'm glad to be home."

Ryu's cheeks darkened to match hers and he opened his mouth to reply before remembering their audience. "Ah, Kanae, we have some visitors from Konoha."

"In Hi no Kuni?"

He nodded. "They're Obaasan's escorts - Team 7's Haruno Sakura, Uchiha Sasuke, and Uzumaki Naruto."

Stepping out of her fiance's embrace, Kanae smiled and bowed. "It's a pleasure."

"The honor is all ours!" Sakura gushed.

Ryu chuckled at the girl's starstruck expression. "Their instructor Hatake Kakashi should be around somewhere..."

"He's doing perimeter checks with the old man," Sasuke spoke, for what seemed to be the first time
in hours. "He should be back soon."

"Old man?" Kanae asked.

"Jiraiya-sama of the Legendary Three," Ryu answered with a grin. "He's Obaasan's 'date' to the wedding."

Naruto nearly laughed out loud. 'Ero-sennin's her date?! Poor Iwano-baasama!'

"That name sounds familiar," Kanae mused. "He's an author isn't he? Fumikaze-sempai mentioned someone similar in regards to her next movie. She was reading the script the whole trip to Mikazuki-jima."

Though the thought of one of her favorite actresses spending an entire boat trip reading the old sage's porn made her want to weep in despair, Sakura refrained from comment.

"That's him," Naruto answered with a grimace. "We should probably go check on him to make sure he's not working too hard." i.e., peeping on unsuspecting girls while they dressed/bathed...

Megumi waved her hand dismissively. "I'm sure he's just fine," she said. "Besides, that will give us plenty of time to get your measurements!"

The blonde twitched.

Recognizing the excited gleam in her eyes, Kanae turned her gaze to Megumi with a slightly concerned smile. "Measurements, Obaasan?"

"Kaasan, Kanae-chan, Kaasan!" the woman corrected. "Measurements for Uzumaki-kun, of course! She's going to be our newest model?"

Naruto balked. "Ehhh?" Sakura pinched her arm beneath the table and she had to hold back a yelp of pain. "Err... I mean, yay...?"

---

From his viewpoint a tree several yards outside the window, Jiraiya regarded the scene with a slight chuckle. "Poor kid..." he mused, dark eyes taking in the barely hidden look of panic in those familiar blue eyes. "She's waaay out of her depth..."

Kakashi appeared on the branch beside him, his brow raised in curiosity. After all, Jiraiaya was perched in a window and the window he was peeking in didn't have any naked women in it; it was quite a shock! "Who? Ito-san?"

The Sage shook his head. "Nah, she's fine... I'd say she's got pre-wedding jitters at best... but with her soon to be mother-in-law I don't blame her..." He paused, his expression slightly pitying. "I meant Naruto... Poor kid's spooked out of her mind."

"Naruto?" The Jounin turned to regard his student. "Scared of playing dress up?"

"While we were looking for Tsunade, we stopped to take in a festival and I got her a kimono to wear..." He remembered spotting it after coming from a meeting with one of his contacts. Even now he wasn't sure what had possessed him to buy it, but pegged it to a sudden urge to give her a little sense of normalcy. After all, with everything that had happened to her within those few short weeks...
He suddenly derailed that thought, choosing instead to recall Naruto's reaction to kimono he'd given her. He had to admit he had been a little disappointed at her less than enthusiastic response to his gift, but he assumed she had been upset that he'd hidden her normal clothes. Well - he chuckled inwardly - that was true to an extent; he'd never met anyone so attached to the color orange. But her expression when she first donned the kimono... "You would'a thought I'd told her to jump in the river!"

"She's done that..." Kakashi said with a snort, recalling how her true identity had come to be revealed. "Well... accidentally anyway..." What would have happened had she not fallen in the river that day, he wondered. Would she have ever decided to come clean about what she was...?"

'Why should she have...?' he told himself with a little bit of derision. 'It's not like we've ever really given her a reason to trust us... especially when we still haven't told her the truth...'

Oblivous to his thoughts, Jiraiya let out another sigh. "It's a shame," he murmured. "She's behaved like a boy so long she doesn't know any other way to be."

Kakashi paused, remembering Iruka's words in the academy all those months ago.

~"She was scared... can you imagine what might have happened if people had known? She didn't know why they treated her they way they did, but Naruto knew it was because of something they felt she was to blame for..."~

It shouldn't have been that way, he knew. A child shouldn't have needed to go to such lengths to protect herself... He turned to Jiraiya, his expression solemn yet curious. "When you first met her," he murmured softly. "Did you know?"

"That she was a girl?" Jiraiya shook his head, letting out a self-deprecating snort. "No, she had me fooled like everybody else..." He frowned, thinking about how he should have known - after all, he'd been there when Sarutobi had shown him her seal. He was ashamed that he'd focused more on it than her, more concerned about the Kyuubi's fate than hers, refusing to acknowledge that she was the only thing remaining of the student he had lost. Despite his efforts, every time he looked at those bright blues he was reminded of her Legacy. "It wasn't until she signed the contract that I--"

"Contract?" Kakashi interrupted.

"For the toads," he answered. "She's a Summoner now."

The Jounin's eye widened in surprise. He remembered Pakkun reporting the fight between Naruto and Gaara and how a giant toad Summon had henge'd into Kyuubi to fight off the Shukaku. The little ninken had somehow neglected to mention just how that toad got there. "So *she* Summoned Gamabunta...?"

"Twice, in fact..." the Sage muttered with a grudging note of pride. And to think the old coot always gave him a hard time when he did the summoning... "And the old codger actually listened to her, too..." He paused, recalling just how she had managed to acquire his cooperation. "Although, it certainly helped that Gamakichi absolutely adores her."

Kakashi chuckled. Leaning back against the tree trunk, he closed his eye with a sigh. "She has that affect on people sometimes..." he mused, recalling how many people the blonde had charmed so far in her career as a ninja. Haku, Inari, Tazuna, Hinata, Lee, Gamabunta, Gamakichi, Iwano-sama, and now Iwano Megumi as well... "She doesn't even realize she's doing it..."

"Well, personally I hope she doesn't figure it out any time soon," the Sage muttered. "If you ever
see her goin' for somethin' she calls 'Kawaii no Jutsu', watch out."

The younger ninja twitched, recalling her infamous Sexy no Jutsu. 'Crap... there's another one out there...?' "It can't be any worse than the 'Oiroke no Jutsu', can it?"

Jiraiya blinked in surprise. "She used that jutsu on you?"

"On Sasuke."

The older ninja immediately laughed out loud. "Poor suckers..." he chortled. Kakashi rolled his eye, although he supposed he would have found it funny too had it not been one of his own students in a naked henge. Thank Kami for those wisps of smoke... "But yes, Kawaii no Jutsu's a helluva lot worse..."

The infamous Copy Ninja shuddered at the prospect. "She came up with it?"

"On the fly, too." Jiraiya answered with a nod. "Brought Gamabunta down in a heartbeat."

Looking in the window at the little blonde currently being attacked by a middle aged woman, three girls, and a roll of measuring tape, Kakashi found it difficult to picture her subduing anything, much less a Boss Summon.

"It's difficult, isn't it?"

"Hm?" He turned his attention back to the white haired ninja beside him. The older ninja's expression was solemn, making him look all his 50 years of age and then some.

Jiraiya's gaze was focused on the blonde. "She looks like him," he murmured. "It was like seein' a ghost the first time I saw her... even more so when I met her face to face..."

Kakashi had suspected Naruto's original encounter with the Toad Sage had not been their first meeting, but the same could be said for him so he refrained from commenting on that fact. In truth, he'd encountered the blonde several times, mostly as part of her unseen guard detail during his stint as a member of ANBU. People had been frightened of the 'little demon child' and had insisted that something be done to 'keep it under control'. The Sandaime had relented, assigning the young blonde invisible guards, not for the villager's protection, but for hers.

It was hard to reconcile the tiny little toddler with the loud, rambunctious child that had crowed in his face in the Academy classroom following the success of a poorly constructed prank. Although he'd had no intention of passing any genin team presented to him, he'd been horribly disappointed to see his Sensei's legacy reduced to a garishly loud buffoon whose only skills seemed to include enraged townfolk, pulling pranks, and defacing monuments.

~ "Ha ha, Sensei, you fell for it!" ~

Oh, how wrong he had been.

It had all been an act; a cleverly crafted charade that seemed far too complex for a 12 year old child to successfully maintain for 7 years. So accustomed to being scorned and looked down upon, the little blonde had accepted the role, playing the part with such convincing ability and skill, but refusing to truly succumb to it.

~ "You're the one who told me to 'see through deception', Kakashi-sensei! I thought you knew!" ~

He should have, but he hadn't.
"So what if people got the wrong idea! I didn't lie!"

She hadn't lied, but it was a lie all the same. And he had believed it.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Kakashi unclenched his hands, raising his gaze upwards into the tree's thick canopy. "I should have known." He felt Jiraiya's gaze fall on him, but the sage remained silent. "I checked on her occasionally...In the orphanage..." A brief image of a scrappy, filthy child with dirty blonde hair standing alone in a dark room entered his mind but he shoved it away. "I even recommended she be moved when it was obvious she was being mistreated..."

'And yet when she was moved into her own apartment you never went back to check on her...' a voice sneered. 'Some protector you are...'

After a long period of silence, Jiraiya prompted him to continue. "But...

"But... that's as far as I went... I never got too close... Never even suspected..." He trailed off, glancing over at Jiraiya. "I'm still letting them down, aren't I?"

The sage remained silent, his expression dark and solemn.

The younger ninja sighed again. He had to make things right. Unfortunately, there was only one way to go about it and he knew it wasn't going to be pretty. "I think... that she should know the truth..."

Jiraiya looked over at the younger man, studying him carefully. "I may have taken over her training, but you are still her teacher." A cop-out, and they both knew it. However, just as he had told Tsunade, Sarutobi had entrusted Naruto to Kakashi. He was the only one who could tell her. "That decision is solely up to you."

"She knows everything else," Kakashi murmured, more to himself than anything. She knew she was a Jinchuuriki, she knew the Akatsuki were after her Bijuu's power... surely she could handle the rest...? "It should be all right..."

"I don't know..." Jiraiya frowned, recalling her near-breakdown during their search for Tsunade. It had taken him a while to realize that while Naruto would never hesitate to voice her objections to something she found unpleasant, more of her subtler emotions were internalized. Because she was such a solitary person, she was unaccustomed to expressing her inner feelings and was more likely to bottle them up until the point she could contain them no longer. It was worrisome...knowing that she was a Jinchuuriki was one thing, but could she handle learning the how and why? He wasn't sure.

His expression mirroring his own, Kakashi let out another heavy sigh. Running a hand through his hair, he closed his eye and leaned his head back against the bark once more. "Neither do I."

~ End Chapter 31
Chapter 32a: Determination

Steady hands carefully turned the pages of the large tome on display, keen amber eyes absorbing the information printed in its depths. After several hours of intense study and note taking, the Godaime no Hokage of Konohagakure no Sato sat back with a grim look upon her face.

"Anything, Tsunade-sama?"

The blonde kunoichi turned her gaze to the doorway where Shizune stood, her dark eyes taking in the pile of books and scrolls surrounding her. She gazed down at the thick medical volume in front of her, sighing softly. "There's something..." she murmured softly. "According to the text I've studied, there is a possible way to safely conduct the procedure..."

Crossing the room to stand behind her, Shizune quickly studied the numerous notes her mentor had taken, her own dark eyes widening in surprise. Although she was a few years out of practice, there was no questioning the fact that Tsunade was a genius. However, gazing away from her notes, the younger medic ninja noted the numerous empty Styrofoam coffee cups littering the large oak desk. "Have you been at it all night?"

Tsunade nodded, amber eyes frowning slightly as they studied a particularly interesting passage of text. "I took care of some other paperwork earlier today, but this has been my focus for the past few hours."

"And you don't think you're pushing yourself too hard?"

The blonde shrugged absently as she made a few notes on a pad of paper beside the book. "There are far worse things I could be spending my evening doing." Realizing the truth in those words, the younger woman held back a grimace. "Besides, this is important."

"That's true," Shizune consented. She let her gaze wander across the table for a brief moments before it landed on a patient medical file. "Is this him...?"

The Godaime paused in her work, her eyes gazing over to the folder where a photo of a dark haired boy with piercing eyes gazed back at her. "Yeah..."

Rock Lee... Tsunade knew that maintaining objectivity was important in her field, but it was times like these when it was difficult. After just laying eyes on the boy for a few seconds, it was obvious to see how important being a ninja was to him. It had pained her to have to be the one to tell him that the odds of continuing his way of life were slim. The way he had frozen as her words sunk into his brain; Tsunade knew she had broken him.

To make matters worse, she knew just how much damage she had caused him just by looking at him. Anyone who actively chose to dress themselves like the 'Green Beast of Konoha' had to be a very... charismatic ninja. She remembered how Naruto had described him during their trek back to the village; in her words, Rock Lee was a talented ninja, whose drive and dedication were almost as great as her own. His strength and will to succeed had earned him her respect. Hell, she'd called him a 'Genius of Hardwork'.

Pausing in her musings, Tsunade's mind supplied an image of the blonde as she had recounted her escapades during the Chuunin exams. She'd become so animated when she described her encounter with the young taijutsu master and her enthusiasm at the thought of sparring with him had been
infectious. Brightness had been in her eyes, matched only by look she had given to him upon their meeting in the hospital...

~ "Yeah! Lee! He's gonna be able to be a ninja again!" ~

Though the exact mechanics of their relationship were uncertain - despite her brilliance, Tsunade suspected Naruto was a little lacking when it came to dealing with people socially - there was no doubt in the medical genius' mind that this boy was one of the people she considered precious. The feeling was no doubt mutual - Naruto had given Lee hope that achieving his dream might still be possible....

She couldn't let that hope die; not after everything she had just been through. While it was her duty not only as a medic, but as Hokage, to do everything in her power to help him, there was so much more to it than that.

~ "Someone once told me..." ~ She remembered the resolute stance the blonde had taken as she stood between her and the Otogakure spy Yakushi Kabuto who was trying to kill them both. It was obvious that the girl was at a disadvantage against a ninja who had been able to taken down both a Jounin and one of the Legendary Three - despite however dishonest and dirty his means - but she held her ground, confident that she would prevail. ~ "People discover true strength when they're fighting to protect someone else..." ~

On that day, Uzumaki Naruto had reminded her of what it meant to be a ninja. Tsunade would be damned before she ever forgot it.

'Feh,' she thought to herself, smirking just slightly. 'You just don't want to let the little brat down...'

Shizune regarded her mistress, slightly puzzled at the smirk on her face. "Tsunade-sama?" she called out tentatively.

"Is Maito Gai on a mission right now?" the Godaime asked.

"No, I don't think so. Why?"

"Have someone send for him." Tsunade closed her book with a loud thump, her amber eyes shining with determination. "I think I've just figure out how to save his student's dream."

--

For years, all he had ever wanted was to become a ninja. To be strong, to defend the village that was his home from all those who sought to harm it. He'd entered the Academy with the hopes of bringing that dream to fruition only to be faced with a heartbreaking reality - he, Rock Lee, was unable to use ninjutsu or genjutsu of any kind.

He had the chakra, he knew the hand signs just as well as any of his peers, and yet each time he attempted even the simplest of jutsu - nothing. It was humiliating, it was painful; day after day he endured the mocking ridicule of his peers. He was the dead last, he was the loser - why keep trying when it was pointless? Why didn't he just give up?

No, he had persevered. True, he couldn't manage ninjutsu, he was useless at genjutsu, but he'd still had his fists, didn't he? His arms and legs? He trained and trained, pushing his body to its farthest limits, refusing to even accept failure.

And then he met Gai-sensei.
In one of the most pivotal moments of his young life, this amazing ninja had sought him out - spotting in him a familiar spark, a burning Fire of Youth much like the one he himself possessed. He took him under his wing, vowing to help him achieve his goal of becoming a great ninja. It would be difficult, of course - he would have to work twice as hard to compensate for what he lacked, but Lee wasn't afraid. He would train even harder, even longer; while he could never be a prodigy like his teammate, Hyuuga Neji, he would still become a genius...

A Genius of Hardwork...

He had come so close, so agonizingly close...! He had mastered Goken, the Strong Fist, and the Lotus... he had successfully learned how to open his Gates to utilize the chakra his body had so cruelly blocked from him. He, along with his teammates, had become one of Konoha's most successful genin teams, sure to make an excellent showing at the Chuunin Exams...

The Chuunin Exams... a grimace briefly stole across his pale face before smoothing back into a dull mask. He'd entered into the exams full of confidence, certain that he could take on anything. With both the Lotus and the ability to open his Gates at his disposal, he wholeheartedly believed that he would finally be able to accomplish one of his minor goals - defeating his self-proclaimed rival, the number one rookie of his graduating class, Hyuuga Neji, in combat. It had to be possible - after all, look at how easily he had trounced the Uchiha outside the third floor classroom! Surely all his hard work had to have paid off!

His defeat at the hands of those Oto-ninja had been a little discouraging but it was his actual fight in the first round that had truly done it... He'd fought his hardest, pulled out all the stops, given everything he'd had, but it hadn't been enough. Not only had he been brutally and viciously defeated, but any chance he'd had at improving himself had fled with the sound of his arm and leg snapping under the pressure of Sabaku no Gaara's merciless sand...

He'd known it was over the moment he'd regained consciousness and met his teammate's faces. Their eyes had said it all... his career as a ninja truly was over.

~ “Why? 'Cuz of what some doctor tells you? You must not have liked bein' a ninja if you're ready to give up!” ~

Lee froze, his thoughts derailed by the loud voice echoing in his head. His gaze quickly drifted across the empty room, landing on the potted plant sitting on his nightstand by the window. Remembering the bright red blossoms the plant had held, the injured boy's thoughts went to the blonde who'd given it to him. Gai-sensei had said the Geranium symbolized determination, something the blonde seemed to have in spades.

~ “Just be strong, don’t doubt, and have faith in yourself. It may take a while, but you can do it!” ~ She had grinned at him as if this was the simplest thing in the world. As if the answer were really that obvious; that she really, truly believed that in her heart of hearts. ~ “Rock Lee will be a ninja again - believe it!” ~

He remembered their first, or perhaps second - according to Gai-sensei, she had come to see him while he was unconscious, leaving behind the gift - encounter at the hospital. He'd been so surprised that someone actually held out the hope of him being a ninja once more that he hardly paid any attention to the fact that that person was an unfamiliar blonde who knew more about him than some random stranger off the street should. When she'd fixed those bright blue eyes on him he'd found himself hoping with all his heart that her words were actually true.

~ “You’re an amazing ninja, Lee. You’ve worked so hard to reach your level despite all the odds against you. You can’t give up now, you just can’t!” ~
He'd tried not to, really he had. Once he'd heard that she'd gone off with one of the Legendary Three, Jiraiya the Hermit Sage, to bring the renowned medical genius Tsunade the Slug Mistress to home to become Godaime Hokage, he'd actually felt as though he stood a chance. If anyone could heal him, certainly Tsunade could!

~ "I'm sorry..." ~ He could feel the world closing in on him once more, that tight feeling welling up in his chest as the words echoed around him over and over. ~ "I hate to be the one to tell you this... but you should give up being a ninja..." ~

Give up... quit... stop wasting time... it seemed like that was the only thing he could do. With only a 50/50 chance at success, what other choice did he really have? It was one thing to die protecting the village, his teammates... but on an operating table...? It was a prospect Lee just couldn't fathom.

~ “Why? ’Cuz of what some doctor tells you? You must not have liked bein’ a ninja if you’re ready to give up!” ~

“What... what am I supposed to do...?” He kept his gaze on the Geranium, as if the plant held all the answers to his problems. It didn't, of course, which left him with only one solution... he would just have to go and see the one who gave it to him.

He only hoped he could find out where she lived.

--

Surprisingly enough, finding her address was relatively easy. He'd found it listed in the Academy Directory - he recalled being surprised to learn that she’d entered into the Academy three years earlier than any of her classmates - and according to her address she didn't live all that far from him. Unfortunately, while the trip would have only taken him a couple minutes via rooftop, he was confined to the ground, willing himself to walk as quickly as his injured body would allow.

After an hour of walking, filled with both self-pitying and frustration towards his invalidity, Lee finally arrived at his destination - a small apartment complex not far from the business district. Hobbled up the stairs to the lone apartment at the end of the hall, he took a deep breath to center himself before knocking resolutely on the door. After a few moments it opened to reveal someone who was not Uzumaki Naru.

The dark-haired boy blinked in confusion. "I-Iruka-sensei...?"

The Chuunin Academy teacher blinked, a similar expression mirroring his scarred face. "Rock Lee...?"

"Is... this not where Uzumaki Naru lives?"

"It is," Iruka answered, a puzzled smile still on his face. "But she's not here, her team had a mission..." He paused, watching as the boy seemed to deflate, slumping heavily against his crutches. "Are you all right, Lee? Why don't you come in and sit down..."

"Oh - I would not want to impose--"

"Nonsense, Naru wouldn't mind..." The Chuunin opened the door wider, ushering the younger genin inside. "Despite outward appearances, Naru actually keeps the place pretty neat..."

Lee wasn't sure if he was referring to the slightly run-down appearance of the building, or the don't-carish attitude the apartment's resident seemed to exude towards all things non-ninja related, but he allowed himself to step over the threshold into the apartment-interior. His dark eyes blinked
at the sight that met him.

Naru's apartment was very, very neat. Her small, almost non-existent genkan lead directly into a small open, sparsely furnished sitting area, which was adjoined by a small kitchenette. Several scrolls and books were neatly stacked upon a low table surrounded by sitting pillows, and there was a short couch off by itself in a corner next to a door which he assumed led to her bedroom.

However, none of these things were given much thought after the initial glance. Upon entering the blonde's personal space he was startled by just how many plants occupied the small space. They stood tall in each corner - excluding the one with the couch, of course - they rested on the two book shelves crammed with books and scrolls, and they hung from baskets, rested on the coffee table and even in the windowsills.

So much green; Naru's home was very youthful indeed.

Iruka saw the boy's awed expression as he took in all the plants. "I take it Naru didn't tell you about her green thumb?"

Lee shook his head, a little disconcerted to realize there was a great deal he didn't know about his fellow Genius of Hardwork.

The Chuunin smiled fondly. "I remember her coming to me after she'd gotten a hold of this humongous Fichus tree that had once taken up residence in the Teacher's lounge. The poor thing had been on its last legs and someone had decided to pitch it in the dumpster behind the building." How she managed to get the thing back to her apartment, he'd had no idea - more than likely she'd suckered someone into helping her - but she'd been frantic in her attempts to resuscitate it.

Quite frankly, Iruka had known absolutely nothing about plants, but in the short time he'd known the blonde - he'd still believed her to be a boy at the time - he'd become quite fond of her, willing to do just about anything to keep a smile on her face. He'd gone straight to a book store, purchasing a book entitled 'Dynamics of Warm Climate Botany'. Granted, she hadn't understood a word of it - she was only a child, after all - but then neither had he really. He was a ninja, not a Botanist! "Still, through a bit of time and patience," Which was really something considering the blonde's reputation. "We managed to save the plant, bringing it back to its former glory."

"Where is it now?" Lee asked.

"In her room, I'd imagine..." the Chuunin mused. "It gets the most light."

"Do you help her take care of all of these plants?"

"Only when she's away on missions," he answered. "She does most of the maintenance without any help." Unless Kage Bunshin counted as outside assistance... "She's gotten quite good at it."

"They are all very beautiful," Lee admitted. It was obvious that she cared very much for all of them - to think that she'd been willing to part with one in order to cheer him up. Uzumaki Naru really was something else...

Iruka quietly studied the boy who seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. It was obvious he was troubled by his situation - had he come to his fellow genin for assistance? "You looks as though you've got something on your mind," he murmured softly. "I know I'm not Naruto, but I'd be willing to listen..."

Lee looked down at his crutches, remaining silent. After a few moments he raised his head, meeting Iruka's gaze head on. "Naru-san... wishes to become Hokage, does she not?"
"She does," the Academy instructor agreed. "The greatest. That's her dream."

He nodded, remembering her loud declaration during her fight with Inuzuka Kiba. That was when she'd truly caught his attention. She'd had such drive and fought with such spirit. Even when the odds had been stacked so highly against her, she held her ground and showed everyone present just what she was made of.

~ "I am not, nor will I ever be, a Dead Last loser!" ~

~ "I'm Uzumaki Naruto, the future Hokage, believe it!" ~

He remembered being so excited, so thrilled to see someone who came from the same humble beginnings - a failure no one believed could ever succeed - to overcome those negative preconceptions and win. She'd displayed such strength and agility - he could hardly wait for the chance to face off against her.

And it seemed neither could she.

~ "Hey, Lee!" ~ He remembered the bright look on her face as she turned back towards him. Just as he had acknowledged her skill and dedication, she had done the same. ~ 'I'm lookin' forward to facing a fellow Genius of Hard Work in the Finals." ~ Their fists had met and Lee had known then that they were kindred spirits. ~ "So good luck!" ~

He didn't want to give that up yet.

And there was Sakura-san as well! Lee froze, remembering the pink-haired angel who had captured his heart all those months ago. How could he have forgotten her and the promise he had made?

~ "Never fear, Sakura-san! I will not allow you to come to harm - I promised to protect you until the day I die!" ~

He also promised himself he would wait as long as it took for her to accept him into her heart. That would never happen if he allowed himself to lay down and surrender! He could not give up!

"I do not give up," he murmured softly. "I must not run away..."

Hearing the familiar term, Iruka quirked an eyebrow in surprise. "Lee...?"

With the aid of his crutches, the boy rose his feet once more. Meeting his gaze again, Iruka noted there were a few less shadows in boy's eyes than there had been before. "Thank you, Iruka-sensei..." he replied. "Being here has helped me a great deal."

"I'm glad," Iruka answered. "What is it you plan to do now?"

"I must speak to Gai-sensei and Hokage-sama," he replied. "Even if my chances are only 50/50... I am going to have that surgery!"

--

Arrangements for the upcoming wedding between Shirotsuki Ryu and Ito Kanae continued on as scheduled. Builders and decorators, planners and caterers bustled all throughout the village making sure everything was exactly right according to Iwano Megumi's specifications. It was her only son's wedding, after all - she wanted everything to be just right!
"Jeez... this place is a madhouse..." a figure in the shadows muttered, casually observing all the people flitting back and forth. "I'd hate to have guard detail in a place like this... I think I'd slit my throat..."

"Be thankful this isn't that kinda job..." another taller figure muttered. "I think if I had to do a job like this, I'd slit your throat for you..."

The first figure hissed in displeasure, elbowing the other in the gut. "Not funny..."

"Now, now, children..." a third and final figure muttered. "We're on a mission, remember? Try to at least *pretend* to be professional..."

"I don't have to pretend," sniffed the first haughtily. "Wish I could say the same about the big lug next to me..."

"Cute... real cute..." Ignoring the rude gesture that followed, the figure turned to their third companion. "Any word?"

"Not yet," came the reply. "People are coming all over the place for this thing... if our target isn't here already, they will be soon."

"So, we're just gonna hafta keep our eyes peeled." replied the first.

"One eye for you, kitty kat..."

"Heh, you're a real comedian--"

"People, people..." growled the third figure. The first two stilled, facing the third with contrite expressions. "This mission is no joke - remember how much money we've got on the line for this one."

"Yes, Aniki."

"Sure, Aniki."

"Well then, knock it off or I'll slit both your throats." Their dark, shadowy corner fell into silence once more. "All right then, now resume your surveillance. I want to hear back from you both in 3 hours. We'll decide our next move then. We clear?"

"Ryoukai!"

With their missions decided, all three vanished from sight.

--

From his perch on a rooftop overlooking the town square, Sasuke tensed at the brief spark of chakra he'd felt a few seconds ago. Briefly scanning the crowded streets for any sign of anything suspicious, he frowned slightly when his search yielded no results. Letting the matter drop, the young Uchiha resumed his surveillance of the square, dark eyes sharp and open on the look out for anything unusual.

After a few moments more Sasuke spotted the young man they'd met upon their arrival to Tokushima; as it turned out he was one of Iwano Megumi's personal assistants, and spent a great deal of time at their estate. He was a few years older than them, 16 at the most, with dark brown hair that was almost back, cropped short and neat around his face. He was dressed in a dark blue
shirt and hakama and looked to be carrying what looked like photo equipment. Hadn't Megumi mentioned something about him being a novice photographer...?

Under normal circumstances, Sasuke wouldn't have given the boy any more thought. However, just as he was about to resume his observations, a familiar voice called out from the crowd.

"Ne, Isamu-san!"

Both boys turned in search of the voice, but only Sasuke frowned when he spotted the bright pink hair of his teammate. "What's she doing here...?"

Isamu smiled, waving a hand in greeting. "Hi there... Haruno-san, right?"

Sakura came to a stop in front of him, giving a brief bow in greeting. "That's right," she smiled. "Sakura's just fine then."

"Sakura it is then. I take it Megumi-sama sent you out on an errand?"

The kunoichi grinned. "She sent me to ask you to pick up some more tea... She said you knew the right kind...?"

"Ahh, yes, Oolong from Hachimomo-san's shop. Megumi-sama always has it in the afternoons - it helps calm her down." He paused, smiling once again. "Would you care to join me?"

Sasuke watched, waiting for Sakura to decline, but to his displeasure her grin widened as she bobbed her head in acquiescence. "Sure!"

Strangely uneasy at the thought of the pink-haired girl fraternizing with one of the locals, Sasuke turned away from the sight, a scowl etched deeply into his face. First Naruto in Nami, now Sakura in Tokushima... He paused, his scowl melting into a frown of confusion. After all, why should it have mattered to him that she was spending her time with someone else? It wasn't as if he wanted her clinging to him all the time! He'd tolerated it for a bit after Otafuku, but that was only because she'd caught him by surprise.

At the mention of the incident, the moment between them in the hospital instantly came to mind...

~ "I'm... I'm so glad... So glad... I thought you'd never come back..." ~

Though he'd still been a bit disoriented, the raw joy and relief in her voice had not gone unnoticed. Nor had the feel of her arms around him. It reminded him a bit of their time in the Forest of Death. He was still a bit foggy on what had occurred there, but he definitely remembered the scent of strawberries, the wetness of her tears, and her arms around his middle as her body shook with sobs.

~ "Thank goodness," she sobbed. "Thank goodness you're back!" ~

"Sakura..." he murmured lowly. She couldn't hear him; by that point she'd already vanished into the crowds with Isamu. He tried to put her from his mind with another scowl, but that only left room for his other female teammate. 'Naruto...'

She'd been his teammate for almost a year now and he still didn't know what to make of her. Everytime he was certain he just about had her figured out she'd go and do something to put more questions in front of him. She was a girl who'd masqueraded as a boy, she'd ranked last in their class but had amazing stamina and mastery of a Jounin-level kinjutsu. She'd declared herself his rival, but had killed a friend to save his life, defeated a Hyuuga, Summoned Toads, thousands of clones all in the attempts to hold off a sociopath intent on killing them all. She'd garnered the
attention of Leaf genin, Sand Genin, Legendary ninja, his brother...

He paused, a frown coming to his face as he remembered that incident. Why had his brother been after Naru? He didn't understand it anymore than he did the look on her face when he'd told her to stay out of his fight. Whereas in the Forest of Death she'd stared at him with a look of wariness, of unease, in the hotel corridor Naruto had almost looked as if she was concerned about him.

~ "Leave him alone! Don't you dare hurt Sasuke!!" ~

She'd been the one his brother had been after, and yet she worried for him? He didn't get it at all!

~ "What, so I should just abandon you? Sorry, but that's not gonna happen, asshole! Konoha ninja stick together." ~

~ "What, Sasuke? You want me to go?" ~ He remembered how her blue eyes had darkened in anger at the thought. ~"I told you I don't abandon my teammates! And certainly not my friends! So just shut up cuz you're stuck with me!" ~

'Stuck with her...' he snorted halfheartedly, remembering how he'd cursed his luck when their teams had first been assigned. 'I've been stuck with her from day one...'

It was that moment at the river that had changed everything. Finally the truth had come out and they all learned that the blonde moron was not all that she appeared to be - she was much, much more. Initially Sasuke had been furious. Who was this fool to act as though she were better than him? He was Uchiha Sasuke, number one Rookie! Did she really believe that she could hold a candle to him?

As it turned out, she could. As time progressed, Naruto had proven again and again that she had what it took to get the job done. She'd pushed on when others couldn't, succeeded where others had failed, and each time she'd done it had been in order to protect someone else.

~ "I won't give up... So long as I have people to protect, I WON'T DIE!" ~

"Naruto..." He frowned, gazing out into the crowds as if he somehow expected the blonde to suddenly appear. "What is it that makes you so strong...?" He thought back to their fight against Gaara, remembering the strange feeling he'd felt welling up in his chest at the thought of her in peril. Knowing that such thoughts would take him nowhere he wanted to go, the Uchiha quickly rose to his feet with a scowl on his face. All this introspective thinking was a waste of time. "Feh... I need some sleep."

A definite plan in hand, Sasuke turned to make his way back to the Iwano estate, certain that he needed to keep thoughts of both his female teammates from his mind. After all, thoughts like that were for the weak.

~End Chapter 32a
Chapter 32b: Fashion no Jutsu

Chapter Summary

Adventures in modelling with everyone's favorite blonde

Chapter 32b

As she made her way back to the Iwano estate, Sakura clutched her packages closer to her chest, struggling to hold back a squeal at her good luck. When she'd initially taken on her mini mission, she'd been uncertain of her success. After all, hers was not an easy task - the possibility of failure was frighteningly high. Still, knowing what might happen should she succeed - Sakura had taken the chance.

Although she didn't rate her overall skills as a ninja very high, Sakura did pride herself on her brains. She was a thinker, a researcher, and more specifically a planner. While her two teammates were more likely to take things as they came, adjusting as necessary, like her classmate Nara Shikamaru, Sakura liked to prepare for future inevitabilities. Which is why when her father presented her with her Academy Graduation gift, she'd been very surprised, but overall pleased.

~ "I know a lot of times you're probably supposed to pack light," ~ he'd said as he'd handed her a little box wrapped in pink paper. ~ "But you never know when you might need this." ~ As she gave a delighted cry at the sight of the small camera contained within, her father, a jovial man with a rather unique hair style (styled similarly to a clover, he'd passed his unique hair coloring onto his young daughter) gave a knowing grin. ~ "Espionage is probably a lot safer than open combat, eh?" ~

Sakura smiled fondly at the thought; her father had always been a bit more supportive of her trade. Her mother was always afraid she'd get hurt. However, rather than dwell on any unpleasant memories, the pink-haired kunoichi turned her thoughts back to her brilliant plan. Although she always kept the little camera in her pack - just in case - she'd never really had an opportunity to use it until now. After all, what went better with fashion design than fashion photography?

However, she knew she couldn't just have the camera right out in the open. Despite the complacency that had been displayed up until this point, Sakura knew her target would never willingly consent to her plan. So, taking matters into her own hands, Sakura had waited until the target was preoccupied by their client before setting the camera up in a hidden location, set on a timer to take multiple shots every couple of minutes.

With several rolls of film in her possession, success was almost at hand! All she needed to do now was get them developed!

Again Lady Luck had shone in her favor with the introduction of Megumi-sama's assistant, Isamu. Considering that he spent so much time around designers, he'd decided to take up photography as a hobby. When she'd approached him for his assistance in what she liked to call OPERATION: FASHION NO JUTSU, he'd agreed as he was amused at the prospect of 'fashion espionage'. After they'd procured Megumi's oolong tea, Isamu had shown her the Dark room he had set up at the estate. With his assistance, in a few hours they'd produced several sets of pictures that would definitely turn some heads back in Konoha.
'Question is...' she mused to herself, a thoughtful frown making its way across her face. 'How to get them there...?'

"Something the matter, little missy?"

Sakura snapped her head up, green eyes zeroing in on the infamous toad sage perched casually in a tree just outside the house gate. "Jiraiya-sama!" She paused, her expression turning suspicious. "Are you up to something...?"

"Me?" the older ninja grinned. "I could say the same of you. What's that ya got there?"

"Just some pictures," she answered warily. "Why?"

Before she could blink, the sage vanished from his perch to directly behind her, her photo envelopes in hand. Ignoring her startled cry, he peered inside. "My, my, my... our little Pinky-chan is quite the voyeur..." He grinned down at her outraged expression. "Looking for a part-time job, by any chance?"

"Whuh--you--nuh--it's not even like that!"

Jiraiya merely chuckled, flipping idly through the photos in his hand. The kid was rather clever setting up the camera the way she had. 'Now why did I never think of that... I could sneak into the women's baths during closed hours... set up a couple cameras and then...'. He paused, his eyes widening at the sight of the picture before him. "Whoa..."

Sakura blinked, gazing up at the stunned expression on the older man's face. "What? What's wrong?"

It took several moments for him to shake himself out of his stupor before he could answer. "Hm...? No... nothing." He tucked the photo back into the stack, turning his attention back to the genin. "What are you planning on doing with these pictures?"

"I was going to send them back to Konoha," she answered. "Though I'm not sure how just yet..."

A wide smirk spread across his face. "Well you've come to the right place, Missy!" he crowed. "I can get them there for you!"

Green eyes blinked before studying him warily once more. "How's that?"

"Sheesh... youth these days..." 'I'm Jiraiya, the super wise sage of Myoboku-zan!' he exclaimed, striking a pose. The young genin twitched, regarding him with a deadpan expression. He held back a sigh. "I'm also the Toad Sage... Master Summoner...?"

Remembering the little toad that had come to visit her with a message from her teammate all those months ago, Sakura's eyes lit up in delight. "Really? Oh could you?"

"Of course," the older ninja grinned. "Provided I get to keep some."

"Huh?"

"Oh come on now," Jiraiya replied, leafing through the stacks for the ones he wanted to keep. "Even I can admit that the kid cleans up nice. Although with the way Megumi an' her daughters are runnin' her ragged, it'll be a while before we see her all gussied up again."

Sakura blinked, feeling a slight stab of guilt. "Really? Are we that bad?"
Jiraiya gave her a sympathetic look. "There's nothing wrong with what you're doing, kiddo," he replied. "But just remember that Naruto's not used to it. I imagine you'd be a bit uncomfortable too so far out of your element."

She nodded, recalling all the times she'd felt in over her head on the battlefield. Was it possible that Naruto felt that way now? "I suppose..."

"Ahh, don't worry about it," the sage chuckled, handing her the photos back with one hand and patting her on the head with the other. "The runt's a sturdy one - she'll survive."

Sakura nodded again, watching as the older ninja took a step back. Nicking his finger, he ran through a few hand signs and slammed his palm to the earth, summoning a familiar red toad in a poof of smoke.

"Yo!" Gamakichi exclaimed.

"Hey, Gamakichi," Jiraiya replied. "We've got a job for ya!"

"We?" Beady eyes shifted in Sakura's direction, lighting up in recognition. "Hiya, missy!"

Sakura waved, a small smile on her face. "Hi there!"

"So, whatcha got for me?" the frog asked. Jiraiya merely directed his attention towards Sakura once more.

Kneeling down in front of him, Sakura held out the envelopes for his inspection. "I need these photos taken back to Konoha," she explained. "Do you mind making a couple of stops?"

"No problem!" the young toad exclaimed. "You need a message delivered - I'm the toad for the job! No doubt about it!"

From behind Gamakichi, Jiraiya made a big show of rolling his eyes. She giggled. "Well, I've divided most of the pictures up into groups - there are..." She paused, doing a little shuffling. "Four packs in all. Each pack contains the same photos, so there are no worries about getting them mixed up. One group should go to Umino Iruka at the Academy, one to Yamanaka Ino at the Yamanaka Hana-ya, one to the Haruno Hon-ya---"

"You're sending one to one of the Green Beast's brats, too, aren't you?" the old sage smirked knowingly.

Gamakichi blinked in curiosity. "Green Beast?" he echoed.

"One of Maito Gai's students," Jiraiya clarified with a grin. "You know which one."

"Oh... Ohhhh yeah... Gotcha!" he turned back to Sakura with a grin. "That all, missy?"

The genin blinked again, feeling as though she were a bit out of the loop. "Um... yeah..." she murmured, placing the packs in his little webbed hands. "You're sure you're all right with this?"

"Of course I am! Ya kidding?" Gamakichi smirked. "Remember, I'm a pro!" His point made, Gamakichi disappeared in a poof of smoke.

"Well," Sakura rose to her feet, brushing off her knees lightly. "I guess that takes care of that." She turned to Jiraiya, bowing slightly. "Thanks very much for the help."
"No problem," Jiraiya grinned. "Now that that's done, you might want to check on your teammate."
Sakura blinked again. "Last time I saw her she was decked out in a purple kimono climbing out one of the windows into the courtyard."

The pink haired kunoichi gawked in horror. Climbing out a window? In a kimono?! In a flash she charged through the gates, steam shooting out of her ears. "That--aaarrrrghh!" *NARUTOOO!! JUST WAIT 'TIL WE GET OUR HANDS ON YOU! SHAAAAANAROOO!!*

Jiraiya watched her go, chortling at the thought of the mayhem that was sure to unfold. Sure he liked the kid, but it was certainly nice to see her on the receiving end of mischief every once in awhile.

At the thought of the blonde, the old ninja paused, reaching into his vest for the small stack of photos he had tucked away earlier. He regarded the picture on top, his eyes taking on a faraway expression as he recalled his initial reaction at the sight of it.

'For the briefest of moments...' He paused, before tucking it back into his vest with a heavy sigh. 'She looked just like her mother...'

--

Iwano Megumi was the devil. And her two twin daughters were no doubt imps created to torment the poor souls unfortunate enough to fall into their clutches.

Though she hadn't initially been *too* worried about the little middle-aged woman - so she wanted her to try on a few dresses, big deal, right? - Naruto was quickly beginning to realize that the ex-fashion designer took her work just as seriously as she did her nindou. The woman was definitely on a mission! For hours, she and her daughters had plucked and pulled and measured her from every possible angle. She recalled feeling embarrassed at her reaction to their attempt to measure the length of her neck. It had taken poor Sakura twenty minutes to convince her to come down from the ceiling...

~ "It's just measuring tape, Naruto-baka, not garrote-wire! Goodness, stop being so jumpy!" ~

And the madness hadn't stopped there... oh no, of course not. While Megumi found her 'Tomboyish flair' cute and endearing, the twin nightmares Michiko and Mitsuko had been horrified to learn that all of Naruto's clothes were essentially masculine - all the way down to her kamaboko boxer shorts.

~ "No, no, no!" ~ Mitsu-er... Michi... Naru wasn't sure which one it had been, but she'd been appalled nonetheless. ~ "This won't do! Not at all!" ~

~ "A lady needs the proper support when wearing certain garments!" ~ exclaimed the other. ~ "Otherwise it ruins the outfit!" ~

The blonde hadn't the foggiest idea what they were talking about, of course. She had support - what did they think her wrappings were for? It certainly wasn't as if she went flopping about all over the place.

At that statement, Sakura had looked as though she wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

And so, after that, the torture went on to include a crash course in undergarments. In the next hour that followed, Naruto had learned far more about seams and no seams, under wires, and 'lifting and separating' than she ever knew she wanted to know... Luckily her captors... er, makeover-ers had gotten distracted when a delivery of several rolls of silk came in. Knowing a prime opportunity...
when she saw it, Naruto took that as her chance to escape.

--

'At last... freedom!' Hiking up the hem of the horrid purple kimono Twin A - she'd given up on trying to figure out who was who - had stuffed her into, Naruto quickly climbed out the nearest window and took to the trees. Mindful of the garment's traditionally long sleeves, which were adorned with multi-colored circles and spheres - she leapt from branch to branch, quickly crossing the Iwano estate in search of a place to hide.

'I'm not hiding...' she amended, holding back a half-hearted chuckle - there was no telling when Sakura would come back from her tea-errand - as she touched down softly on the rooftop of a small gazebo. 'I'm... making a tactical retreat...'

Snorting at the ridiculousness of that statement, the small blonde studied her surroundings. A flash of red caught her eye and she blinked at the sight of Ito Kanae sitting in the garden by a small fountain. With as much grace she could muster buried under layers of fabric as she was, Naruto dropped down to the ground, trailing her wide sleeve as she waved a greeting. "Hi there!"

Kanae jumped in surprise, letting out a startled laugh. "Uzumaki-san! My goodness!"

The blonde blinked, smiling apologetically. "Sorry 'bout that, Jouchan."

"It's all right," she smiled, brushing a stray lock of hair out of her face. "You just surprised me."

She paused, studying the garment she wore before fixing her with a knowing smile. "Hiding out, I suppose?"

Naruto twitched guiltily. "Me? No, of course not! I'm just..." Here she paused, trying to think up a logical explanation. How did Kakashi-sensei do it? Getting lost on the 'road of life' indeed... Bah...! "Checking on you, of course! Guard duty an' all that."

The older woman grinned, chuckling softly. "It's all right, Uzumaki-san," she said. Leaning towards her, her grin quickly turned conspiratorial. "I'm hiding out, too. Taking a break from all the fitting and frills."

Blue eyes blinked. "Oh,"

"It does get exhausting after a while, ne?" Kanae smiled as the blonde bobbed her head up and down vigorously. "Just out of curiosity though... how is it you managed to escape their clutches?"

A wide grin spread across Naruto's face. "Kawarimi and Kage Bunshin no jutsu," she explained with a pleased and proud grin. "Two of my specialties..."

Kanae blinked in awe and surprise. "And no one will notice?"

Megumi and the twins certainly weren't trained ninja, and even if they had been, at the time they were too busy debating between koi and floral prints to notice her actual departure. By the time Sakura got back, there would already be a shadow clone in place to endure the rest of the day's fitting. "Unless someone pricks it with a pushpin I think I'm pretty safe for a few hours."

"How lucky," Kanae sighed wistfully. "I've only a few more minutes, I'm afraid. I have a meeting with the caterers that can't be missed."

The blonde studied the older woman, cocking her head in confusion. "This seems like a whole lotta fuss for just one wedding," she mused. "Why go through all the trouble?"
Kanae smiled as if the answer were obvious. "I love Ryu," she replied. "Mind you, I would have been more than happy to be married before the justice of the peace... we'd certainly be able to being our lives together that much faster..." She trailed off, a bright pink flush spreading across her cheeks. 

Naruto considered her words, her blue eyes dark in consideration. "So... you're doing this all for him?"

"For his family," she answered. "Megumi-obasan is very excited for this wedding... as I'm sure you've seen..."

The kunoichi grimaced lightly. "Err... yeah..."

"She means well," Kanae went on. "She loves her son so much and wants to send him off in the best way she can."

"She loves you, too, I think," Naruto mused. "She's real excited to have you as a part of her family."

"Family is important," the actress smiled. "And Megumi has always been so kind to me. I owe her so much..." She paused, blushing again. "She allowed me to meet Ryu, after all."

Naruto remained silent, her expression thoughtful.

Kanae regarded her quietly. "Is something wrong, Uzumaki-san?"

"Er, no... just thinking..."

"Thinking...?"

The little kimono clad ninja shifted, pushing her wide sleeve back as she scratched her head bashfully. "Um..." She paused, recalling her bathhouse conversation with Sakura and wondering if perhaps the older woman might have any further insights. She wasn't sure why the subject suddenly seemed so intriguing to her, but now was as good a time as any, right? "How did you know...?" she murmured. "With Ryu...?"

Blinking a little before letting out a little 'ah' of understanding, Kanae regarded the younger girl with a kind smile. "That he was the one?" Naru nodded. As she studied the girl, her smile widened a little in curiosity. "May I ask... do *you* have someone...?"

Blue eyes widened as Naruto shook her head vehemently. "No... no! I was just curious... that's all..."

Nodding, Kanae sat back a little, an indulgent smile upon her face. The girl was young, after all; perhaps twelve, thirteen...? Perhaps there wasn't anybody... yet... Although, there had to be a reason she was asking, right? "Well..." she began. "Ryu was so very quiet when we first met. His father had died from an illness and he'd just recently taken over his mother's work so he was very business oriented. I had been doing small work here and there - minor roles and what have you when someone suggested I do a little modeling. When I was referred to him I was very excited - after all, the son of the famous Iwano Megumi...? How often do you get a chance like that...?"

Naruto honestly had no idea, but she figured the chances had to be pretty slim. "So when you guys first met...?"

"We started out as mere business acquaintances first," she went on. "But as we continued working together we quickly learned how much we have in common. It was so easy to talk about things not
pertaining to work and we really enjoyed each other's company." Kanae smiled softly in remembrance. "We soon became good friends."

"Friends?"

The redhead nodded. "I believe it's very important to be friends first," she said seriously. "How else then would you know that you're with someone you can trust?"

It made sense, she supposed; the best ninja in the world couldn't accomplish a mission together unless they could trust their teammates. However, trusting someone with your life had to be different than what Kanae was referring to. What exactly did she mean? "Trust with what?"

Placing a hand over her own chest, Kanae gave her a gentle smile. "Your heart..."

Naruto blinked in awe. "Your heart..."

"I remember..." Kanae went on. "It was nearly 4 years ago... Ryu's head model had fallen ill and they needed someone to take her place."

"He asked you?"

She nodded. "I didn't want to at first... I didn't feel as though I was good enough..."

The genin frowned, staring at her incredulously. "Not good enough? You?"

Kanae smiled at the unintentional compliment. "I may have done a little modeling here and there but I'm just an actress - I'd never been a top model in a runway show... I wasn't sure if I could do it..." She paused, closing her eyes as if remembering some specific moment. "But something in Ryu's eyes... I knew I couldn't let him down... so I agreed."

"What happened then?" Naruto asked.

"Ryu redesigned his entire wardrobe line-up just to suit me," she answered. His design team had nearly had a conniption, but when he resigned to redo it all by himself they quickly got on board. "I modeled for him at the show, wearing the clothes he'd made just for me." She paused again, remembering stepping out onto the stage in front of all those people, seeing only the awe and admiration in the eyes of the dark haired man who'd made it all possible. "I've never felt more beautiful than I did in that moment... It didn't matter who else was looking... I knew then that Ryu only had eyes for me..."

The blonde paused, still thoughtful. "Is that when you realized you loved him?"

Kanae shook her head. "It took a little more time for it become something more. I'd liked him before then, but it was after that time that I began to realize that something had definitely changed between us. That day I learned that Ryu saw me differently than he saw anyone else, and that made me special in his eyes, important. I promised myself I would do whatever I could to be worthy of him."

It sounded similar to something Naruto had heard before, but not quite. It was like having a precious person, who means so much more...

~ "How do you know when you have a crush on someone?" ~

~ "How do you know...? Well... let's see... You meet someone who you think is interesting... whether you think they're brave, or smart, or kind... you like spending time with this person and
you're happy, excited, whenever they're near. You want to do whatever you can for this person to keep them happy... because when they're sad, you're sad too..."

Faced with a concept she still wasn't quite sure she fully understood, Naruto tucked her hands back into the sleeves of her kimono, huffing lightly. "It's confusing..."

"Sometimes, yes," Kanae agreed. "Of course, it's different for everyone. When it happens to you, you'll know..."

Was it supposed to...? Naruto wasn't quite sure what to think of that either. "Huh..."

After a few moments of contemplative silence, Kanae rose from her seat. Regarding the confounded frown on the little blonde's face, she allowed a wide grin to spread across her own. "Of course," she mused lightly. "A cute girl like you, there might be somebody out there head over heels in love with you already." Her grin widening at the look that passed across the younger girl's face, Kanae gave her a parting bow and headed back indoors.

Naruto watched her go, her thoughts a jumbled mess. '...In love with me...?' It was a concept the little blonde couldn't even begin to fathom. She was Uzumaki Naruto, after all - the infamous prankster, Jinchuuriki to the terrible Kyuubi no Youko... Why would anyone in their right mind--?

With a little frustrated grunt, she shook her head to rid herself of the troubling thought. "Why'm I worrying about this stuff anyway? I gotta focus on becoming stronger so that I can become the greatest Hokage!"

Rising to her feet, Naruto tensed, feeling a familiar rush of images and sounds that always came with the destruction of one of her Kage Bunshin. She had no time to process the sudden intake of information, a destroyed clone could mean only one thing... "Oh crap..."

"NARUTOOOO!!"

The blonde paled, her eyes widening in terror at the thought of capture. She wasn't ready to go back yet! Drawing her fingers into the cross seal, Naruto created three Kage Bunshin that she sent off into the house in different directions. As they vanished from sight, Naruto dashed into the trees, her mind rapidly calculating her next move. Just when she thought she had a solid plan ironed out, she felt a hand reach out from behind, grabbing onto her kimono.

Before she could even attempt an evasion or escape, she saw the world vanish from in front of her in a swirl of leaves.

---

Back in Konoha, Chuunin Umino Iruka stood in the Hokage tower, handing out missions to the incoming genin teams. He was just about to hand out a guard duty mission to Team 10 when a little red toad appeared in a cloud of smoke on the table in front of him, several envelopes in hand. "Hey there!" it exclaimed.

Ino yelped in surprise, grabbing Shikamaru's sleeve. "It talked!"

"It's all right, Ino," Iruka smiled. "He's a Summon - sent by Jiraiya-sama, correct?"

Tsunade, who had been busy going through some paperwork, quirked an eyebrow in curiosity.
"Actually..." the toad replied, passing an envelope to the Academy instructor. "I have a message from a Haruno Sakura."

"From Forehead?!" the blonde kunoichi gawked. "No way - what for?"

Iruka shrugged casually, opening the envelope to peer inside. Dark brown eyes widened at the sight of the photos inside. "Oh wow..."

Tsunade, Shizune, and Team 10 leaned forward, curious as to what had the Chuunin instructor so surprised.

Gamakichi hopped forward, tugging on Ino's shirt. "Hey, your name's Ino, right? Yamanaka Ino?"

The blonde nodded. "Yeah, that's me." She blinked as the toad handed her an envelope as well. Pulling out several photos, her blue eyes bugged out comically at the sight in front of her. "Is-is... Is that who I think it is?!!"

Chouji and Shikamaru blinked as their female teammate let out a loud screech, tossing the photos up into the air.

"Ino...?!" Shikamaru plucked one of the photos out of the air, mildly alarmed and curious as to what would cause this kind of reaction. Several of the pictures included Haruno Sakura in a stylish kimono standing with some adults - an older woman, a dark haired man in glasses, and a redhead woman. Assuming they had to be of some importance - really, why else would Ino be flipping out? He was about to drop the matter entirely when a flash of blonde in one of the photos caught his attention. Picking it up and bringing it closer for his inspection, he too gawked in surprise at what lay before him.

That... that wasn't who he thought it was, was it?

"No way..."

Opening a pack of chips, Chouji glanced over his shoulder, regarding the photo as he munched on his snack happily. "Wow," he muttered. "Naruto sure looks cute."

--

"Mooouuu, Kakashi-sensei! Can't you warn me the next time you pull something like that?"

Kakashi regarded his smallest student with his patented crescent-eye grin. "I could," he grinned. "But where would the fun in that be?" The blonde huffed, making a rude face. "I could take you back, of course..."

"What?! Er, no... don't do that...! I mean, I'm sure you had something important to tell me, ne...?"

That brought the jounin up short; it took all of Kakashi's efforts not to grimace in unease. "No, not really..." he said casually. "I just figured I'd give you a sporting chance." He regarded her purple kimono, his eye creasing in a grin once more. "It's got to be difficult moving around in that thing."

"Who are you kidding?" Naru exclaimed, tugging haphazardly at the large obi tied tightly around her waist. The action, however, proved to be difficult what with the way her heavy sleeves kept sliding down over her hands. Pushing them up out of her way for what seemed to be the millionth time, the little blonde let out a huff of frustration. "Mouuu..."

Chuckling softly, Kakashi decided to take pity on the girl. Reaching into one of the pockets on his
vest, he drew out a roll of wrappings similar to the ones the blonde normally wore around her hands. "Here - hold still a minute."

The blonde cocked her head in confusion but did as he asked. Shifting behind her, Kakashi gathered up her sleeves, rolling them back up towards her shoulders. Next he took the wrapping, winding it up under her arms to hold the heavy material up into place before tying it in a neat knot. "There. That should do it."

Naruto flapped her arms experimentally before allowing a wide grin to split her face. "That's perfect!" she cheered. "Those sleeves were driving me crazy! How do girls manage it?"

Kakashi closed his eye in an amused grin. "Well, I'm sure they covered all that back in Courtesan training..."

The blonde had the good grace to blush before letting out a small 'feh'. "There were lots more cooler things to learn than flower arranging and tea ceremony," she muttered. "Like that cool transportation jutsu you do!" Her eyes brightened at the prospect of learning something new. "Can you teach me that? Huh, Kakashi-sensei?"

"I suppose I could..." he mused. "But wait 'til we get back to Konoha - we are still on a mission, after all."

Naruto deflated a little, but nodded in understanding.

Kakashi sighed inwardly, trying to think of some way to salvage the situation. Standing here now he realized that Jiraiya was right. Now was not the time to have the conversation he'd wanted to have with her. It was important that she know the truth, but what would happen once she did? How would she react? He deserved any reaction she decided to give him, but they couldn't afford it during this mission. It was a wedding for crying out loud!

Instead of causing a possibly damaging incident, the Jounin instructor decided then that the time might be better spent getting to know his student better. After all, wasn't that what he'd first resolved to do when he found out the truth about her?

"Speaking of new jutsu, Naruto," he drawled. The blonde glanced back up at him, her blue eyes blinking curiously. "Word has it you have a few new jutsu up your sleeve."

"One or two," she admitted, giving her rolled sleeves a perfunctory glance before grinning slightly. "O'course, I had to in order to beat Neji back in the Exams."

Kakashi noted there was no -asshole attached to the older boy's name this time, but made no mention of it. "I'm sorry I missed your fight," he replied. "I heard you were really amazing."

She blinked again. "Really?"

He nodded. "The proctor, Shiranui Genma, said you even blocked a Hyuuga Kaiten."

Naruto regarded the older ninja, her blue eyes thoughtful. She remembered how upset she had been when she learned that he had turned her training over to someone else in favor of focusing on Sasuke. While most of her upset had been from the fact that she had been assigned to *Ebisu* of all people, she had been more frustrated with herself for expecting anything different. She'd kept not only her gender, but her skill level, a secret for so long... it was no wonder people were surprised by her abilities.

She remembered Sakura's words to her after their return from Nami no Kuni...
"It's like you can't decide how to act around us! One minute you're all serious and then the next you're acting like a goofball again! Why can't you be real around us?"

She'd dropped the act around her female teammate and had finally earned the respect and friendship she'd been wanting from the beginning. Didn't her sensei deserve that same chance?

"I will always do whatever I can to protect my comrades and my students," ~ he'd told her in the hospital after she'd returned with Tsunade. She'd been surprised that he'd still been concerned about her, despite everything he'd been through because of her. ~ "I guess you can say that's a part of my nindo."

With that thought in mind, Naruto turned to face her teacher once again, a wide grin threatening to split her face in two. "Well, it started out just after I visited Lee at the hospital and realized I needed to be able to block Neji's Jyuuken..."

--

While Naruto began her tale of her Chuunin exam training experience, surprising her teacher yet again with her cleverness, another ninja far away was in for an entirely different type of surprise.

"Byakugan!" With a quick burst of chakra sent to the tenketsu points around his eyes, Hyuuga Neji's world shifted into a swirled mix of black and white, magnifying everything around him. Alone in the middle of his team’s training field, he stood completely still, searching out his quarry.

'Four... five... six... seven...' With the use of his clan’s kekkei genkai, one by one each of his targets came within his sight. "Seven... there are seven birds total..." Releasing the doujutsu, he relaxed his stance pleased with his efforts.

"Heeeyy... not bad at all...

The genin paused, gaze shifting sharply until it landed on a little red toad perched in a tree. Neji held back a grimace; the tree was in his blind spot. Realizing the toad had actually spoken to him, his pale eyes widened in recognition. “You’re the Summoned toad from before…” he murmured, remembering his sudden appearance at the Noodle stand he'd gone to. He hadn't been back since, feeling it wouldn't be right unless...

'Unless *she* was there...?' He snorted inwardly at the thought. 'Ridiculous... She's not that interesting...'

Unaware of the boy's thoughts, the little toad was introducing himself. “Yup, Gamakichi’s the name,” he said. “Only I’m delivering a message this time.”

Neji still found it a little surprising to learn that the blonde kunoichi who’d moaned and groaned over a bowl of noodles was acquainted with one of the Legendary Three. Uzumaki Naruto was a curious one indeed. “A message you say?”

“You got it,” The toad paused, studying him briefly. “You are Maito Gai’s student, aren’t you?”

The boy nodded, frowning curiously at the small envelope the frog tossed to him in response.

“Who is this from?”

“Haruno Sakura of Team 7.”

‘Haruno Sakura… Naruto’s teammate?’ The girl Lee always seemed to be fawning over. Neji’s frown deepened. Why would she be sending him anything? Opening the envelope, he peered at the
contents inside, his eyes widening once again at the stack of photos inside.

Given the angle and the way the subject never seemed to be looking directly at the camera, it was obvious that the photos were taken in secret without the subject’s knowledge. He continued flipping through the stack, his astonishment increasing with each new photo.

Why… why had Haruno sent this to him?

Seeing the mounting confusion on his face, Gamakichi cocked his head. “What’sa matter, don’cha like them…?” he asked. "Everyone else thought they were pretty good..."

Everyone else…? The Hyuuga was at a loss for words. “Why… why did she want me to have these…?”

Gamakichi gave him a look. “Beats me,” he said finally. “I’m just the messenger. See ya!” With a jaunty little wave of his webbed hand, he vanished in a puff of smoke.

At his sudden departure, the birds that had been nestled in the trees became startled, taking to the skies. Distracted, Neji watched them go, pausing slightly at the presence of an eighth bird.

‘So… there were eight after all…’

“Neji!” He glanced up, watching down as Tenten touched down in front of him. “There you are! I’ve been looking all over for yo—hey, what’re those?”

He said nothing, handing her the previously viewed photos as he looked through those remaining.

“Oh my gosh, is that Naruto? She looks so cute!” The brunette paused, grimacing slightly at the next picture. "Although… purple is not her color… that print is hideous!” She looked up at her teammate, a smile returning to her face. “We should bring these with us to the hospital; Gai-sensei and Lee should see these!”

“The hospital?”

Tenten’s smile dimmed slightly, turning slightly tremulous. “Lee finally made his decision,” she answered softly. “He’s gonna have the surgery…”

That brought Neji up short; he lowered the pictures, meeting his teammate’s eyes with an earnest expression. “When?”

“Tomorrow; they’re prepping him today.” Tenten paused, gazing down at the photos in her hands once more. “He really should see them…”

Neji paused, remembering the enthusiasm that had returned to Lee following her supposed visit to him in the hospital. Although she’d reportedly been dressed like a girl, there was no way she’d looked anything like in these photos. “Aa… let’s go.”

The weapon’s mistress smiled at him before jumping away. Neji remained in silence a few moments more, studying the last few shots in his hand. As he came upon the last picture, he let out a sharp gasp, his eyes wide in shock.

She was donned in a dress of soft white silk, with thin spaghetti straps holding it up over her pale shoulders. Her face was done up with a little bit of makeup to bring out her eyes and the rosy blush of her cheeks. And her hair… by Kami her hair looked almost like silky strands of gold, draped down around her face and just barely touching her shoulders. A flower – possibly an Iris if his
memory served him right – was tucked behind her ear, keeping her bangs out of the way and providing a clear view of her face.

His hand trembling softly, he brought the small photo closer to his face for better inspection. Though she was turned away from the camera – again, she probably didn’t even realize her photo was being taken - there was no mistaking those same vibrant blue eyes.

He blinked. And then he blinked again.

This was not the same Uzumaki Naruto that had made her presence known at the Chuunin Exams.

"My God..." he murmured, well aware of the pink flush settling across his cheeks. He didn't know whether to be amazed or horrified! "She is... beautiful...!"

He stared at the photograph for several more moments, his mind unable to process the information it was being fed. However, after finally realizing he had probably lingered too long – by now Tenten would be wondering what was taking him so long – Neji did the only thing he could do… With a quick burst of chakra, he took off towards the hospital…

…although not before tucking the last picture of a certain blonde in his pocket.

~End Chapter
Chapter 33: Wedding

Chapter Summary

Fluff and wedding-related hijinks...

Until everything goes to pot. Again.

Chapter 33

Iruka gazed down at the pictures in front of him, a small smile threatening to spread across his face. The subject of the photo stared back at him, unaware of the camera or the photographer snapping away at different intervals in time. It was rather funny actually; were it not for the photographic evidence, he wouldn't have believed such a thing to be possible!

“Ah… they grow so fast, don’t they?

The Chuunin jumped, turning around to spot the grinning blonde Slug Mistress standing behind him. "Hokage-sama!" he exclaimed.

"Take it easy," she chuckled. "I'm just takin' a look at your pictures." She picked one up, studying it as her grin turned into a smirk. "Y'know, I wouldn't have thought such a thing possible..."

"Yeah," he agreed with a laugh. "I was just thinking to myself that it's a good thing we've got evidence. If someone had told me this had happened I wouldn't have believed them otherwise."

The Godaime paused, studying him a few seconds before chuckling again. "No worries, Iruka... She'll always be your little blonde knucklehead."

He blinked up at her with a slightly flustered laugh. "What...?"

The older woman rolled her eyes. "Oh, c'mon... you know as well as I do that you're the little runt's father-mother-and big brother all rolled into one," she replied, holding back a grin at his flushed expression. "All the way back here, the kid had nothing but good things to say about her 'Iruka-sensei'."

Iruka smiled, gazing back down at the picture of the little blonde he'd taken under his wing all those years ago. When he'd really gotten to know her, he'd realized the two of them were kindred spirits - lonely orphans with no one to look after them. While their arrangement had started out as an obligation to the Sandaime - the previous Kage had done so much for him - it certainly hadn't taken long for him to get attached to her, or vice-versa. He'd taken one good look at those big blue eyes of hers and knew there was no way she was the demon who'd taken his parents from him. She was a small, lost little kid with a heart bigger than the five Shinobi nations who just needed someone, just one person, to show her that she wasn't the monster everyone believed her to be. She wanted to become a ninja, the greatest ninja, in order to protect everyone and he'd promised to help her anyway he could. That day in the park all those years ago he'd agreed to be her teacher.

He realized that over time he'd become a friend as well as a mentor to her - as well as a way to get the occasional free bowl of ramen - but it had never crossed his mind to consider himself her father-figure as well.
"Next thing you know, I'll be on her case about wearing too much make-up, or spending too much hanging out with boys..." The young chuunin grimaced at the thought. It made him sound overprotective and old-fashioned!

Seeing his expression, the Hokage laughed again. "Don't worry, Iruka," she chuckled. "I doubt she's gonna start running around in..." She paused, nearly snorting at the little pink number her fellow blonde was wearing in the picture in front of her. He hadn't seen this one yet, had he? 'What is that... a waitress's outfit...?' "...mini skirts and heels anytime soon... This is Naruto we're talking about."

"True," Iruka agreed, recalling the only time he'd seen her in actual feminine attire prior to this. It had been at the Sandaime's funeral. He'd been surprised, and on some level a little relieved, to see the blonde standing beside her teammates in the standard kunoichi funeral attire - a collared black tunic blouse and matching skirt. Her wild hair had been just subdued as her, held back out of her face with thin black clips. It was a little startling to see her dressed that way - judging by the looks of some of their peers, it seemed he was not the only person to think so, but overall he was glad that she'd done it.

When he'd asked her later on about the sudden change, she'd smiled and said, ~ "I thought it'd be nice for the old man to see the real me just once..." ~

It was about time she started being true to herself. Sandaime-sama would be proud of her; he just knew it. After all, he was. 'Naru...'

Tsunade gave him a knowing look before setting down the photos with a loud sigh. The Chuunin looked over at her in curiosity. "Well, I guess we should be glad this was probably only a one-time thing - especially considering how some of her old classmates reacted at the sight of these photos." Both ninja held back a snort of laughter at Yamanaka Ino's reaction; that Haruno Sakura was a wily one. "She really is a cute little thing when she cleans up, but I'd hate to see what'll happen when she figures out how to use those looks of hers to her advantage."

'She already has... to an extent...' Iruka thought with a grimace. Although, however much he hated that jutsu, he was not about to inform the Hokage of Uzumaki Naruto's so called 'Oroike no Jutsu'. He wanted her to live to see her next birthday after all...

"At any rate..." the Godaime went on, unaware of her subordinate's thoughts. "Her mission should be wrapping up within a day or two... If everything goes according to plan, she should be back within Konoha's walls within the next week."

Iruka blinked, his brows furrowing in concern at the wording of the Hokage's statement. "'If everything goes according to plan'...?" he echoed.

Taking a few of the pictures up from the table and tucking them into her blouse - Iruka flushed heavily at this but she ignored him (she had to have some sort of dirt on the little punk, after all... and this was gold!) - she gave him another amused smirk. "This is Naruto we're talking about," she muttered. "They don't call her the most Unpredictable Ninja for nothing."

Iruka nodded, feeling a familiar stab of paternal/fraternal worry for the little blonde displayed in a lovely light blue dress with sheer layers of fabric fluttering around her. He knew the little kunoichi attracted trouble like flames did moths, but he held out the hope that nothing would happen to her on her current mission.

After all, it was just a wedding, right? What could go wrong?
He gazed out into the town square, watching as the finishing touches were placed upon the decorations for the upcoming wedding. From what he'd heard, the wedding ceremony would take place first, followed shortly by a grand reception that had been the talk of just about everyone in town since his arrival. People from all over had come to witness the event and the little town was packed to the brim with celebrities, dignitaries, paparazzi and the like.

He paused, trying to hold down the uneasiness roiling around within him. It would be tough, but if he played his cards right, he could make it...

A girl a few years younger than him jogged by, and it was instinct alone that kept him from reaching for the weapon he had concealed beneath heavy layers of fabric.

'Relax...' he told himself, gazing at her absently as she went about her way without even noticing his presence. *There's no threat here...'*

However, that wasn't true. There were threats everywhere; even a place like this, a quaint little village preparing for a wedding, was fraught with danger. Sure, the large crowds could work to his advantage, but he couldn't lower his guard - not even for a minute. There were so many what-if's, so many variables, even the slightest of things could cause everything to go so wrong.

*I can't let that happen,' he told himself, frowning darkly. He'd come too far, worked too hard to allow everything to fail now. *No matter what, I cannot fail my mission!*

Once more resolute in his goal, he took a step back, vanishing into the shadows to prepare. By this time tomorrow, he'd be ready to make his move. He couldn't allow himself to fail, no matter what.

---

He opened his eyes to vast darkness, a deep scowl spreading across his face at the familiarity of it. "What... What is this...?"

"Still so weak, little Brother...?"

The voice, although expected, startled the young ninja into awareness. Reaching into his weapon's pouch for a kunai, Sasuke turned on his heel to meet his elder brother's bland crimson-eyed gaze. Though he realized he wasn't really there - this was another dream, he was sure of it - that familiar hatred surged and burned within him as he bit out his name with an angry snarl, "Itachi...."

The elder Uchiha remained unaffected by his tone, his stance as relaxed as it had been in the hotel corridor. Clearly he didn't view him as a threat - yet. "So," he replied softly. "Are you finally ready to face me, little Brother?" He paused, Sharingan eyes studying him quietly. "Or are you still afraid?"

"Afraid?!!" The flame of hatred within him ignited into a blistering inferno. Sasuke let out another furious snarl as he charged towards the older Uchiha, his blade poised to strike. "I'll kill you!"

Itachi easily avoided his strike, but Sasuke expected as much. With burning red eyes, Sasuke watched as his hated elder brother feinted to the left. Spotting his opening he did the same, spinning slightly on one foot and springing into position right before Itachi, just as another ninja had done to him months ago. Watching three-tomoe'd Sharingan eyes widen in slight surprise, Sasuke's kunai switched from one hand to the other before plunging in for the kill.
Time seemed to freeze, and after what seemed like an eternity later, Uchiha Itachi let out a soft breath and slumped forward against his younger brother's shoulder.

Sasuke tensed but remained silent. He didn't feel any sort of victory or satisfaction; this was a dream after all, it wasn't real...

"What's wrong...?" the elder Uchiha asked, his breaths becoming fainter by the moment. Suddenly, he seemed to shrink in on himself, his body becoming smaller and smaller as his coloring muted and changed. Sasuke frowned in confusion; what was going on? "Don't you feel better now...?" Blue eyes beneath a mop of blonde hair gazed up at him curiously. "...Brother...?"

--

Waking up, Sasuke let out a sharp gasp, his body entire body tense. Taking a quick look around at his surroundings, he realized he was still within the Iwano estate, seated out on the roof outside the room Iwano Megumi had set aside for him and his two *female* teammates. There had been a few remarks about the arrangement - from Jiraiya mostly, the old lech - but considering that there was so much going on already in regards to the wedding, allowing a little impropriety in this regard didn't seem like such a big deal. They were only sleeping there, after all.

Speaking of sleeping... Sasuke tensed again, hearing the soft breaths of someone deep in sleep coming from right next to him. A little put out that he hadn't noticed the presence earlier, he froze in alarm as that person shifted, a blonde head falling bonelessly against his shoulder as if he were some sort of pillow.

'...the hell...?' Sasuke stared at his teammate, remembering how his thoughts of her had driven him to this spot in the first place. It was no wonder she'd somehow worked her way into his dreams as well...

~ 'Don't you feel better now... Brother...?' ~

He immediately pushed that thought from his mind, in no way wanting to revisit the image attached to it. Instead his mind went back to their fight against Gaara during the Oto-Suna Invasion. He remembered how she'd faced down the redheaded sociopath, refusing to let him sacrifice himself so that she and Sakura could escape. After being beaten down, tossed around like a ragdoll, still she stood up to their enemy, drawing on an impossible amount of clones.

The Suna ninja's expression had mirrored his own. ~ "Impossible... No one can create that many Shadow clones!" ~

The clones in proximity to him had smirked, and the words that had come out of their mouths still echoed in his head even now...

~ "You'll find nothin' is impossible when my family's in danger!" ~

'Family...' Sasuke stared down at the blonde, unable to put a name to the emotions running through him. Why was she here? After a few minutes of silent pondering, he began to feel uncomfortable with the blonde so close to him like this. Sakura was one thing, but here he had to draw the line... Blushing lightly, he let out a grunt of annoyance, elbowing the smaller blonde in the arm. "Oi. Get off."

Predictably the blonde jerked awake, whipping her head around with sleepy blue eyes. "Pork and Miso, please!" It took a few moments for her to realize that she was not at the Ichiraku Ramen stand and when she did she let out a little pout of disappointment. "Aww... it was just my
imagination...

Annoyed that she would be dreaming about something so ridiculous, Sasuke scoffed in annoyance, turning blue eyes back his way. "Don't you have better things to be doing than sleeping on the job?"

Naruto blinked at him. The thought of mentioning how she'd found him here fast asleep ran through her head, but as she didn't feel like explaining why she'd chosen to join him she decided to let it slide. Instead, she twitched, giving him a squinted look of annoyance. "I was not asleep!" she protested.

The Prodigy rolled his eyes. "Right..." Taking a moment to study her more carefully, he took in her new attire, willing his eyes not to bulge comically at the sight. Gone were the horrid orange jacket and pants; the blonde beside him was dressed in deep blue kimono with dark red roses embroidered into the silken fabric. The outfit itself would have been normal enough had it not been for the fact that the hem of the garment stopped about mid-thigh, leaving the blonde's legs exposed all the way down to the dark colored tabi on her surprisingly dainty looking feet.

It took all the Avenger's willpower not show his reaction to this on his face. And here he'd thought that prank jutsu of hers was bad!

The kunoichi glanced over at him, cocking her head at the frown upon his face. What was his problem now? "What...?" she asked warily.

Realizing he had been staring, Sasuke smoothed his face back into its usual disinterested mask. Meeting the blonde's gaze again, he merely quirked an eyebrow and replied, "What's with the getup?"

This time it was Naruto who turned red, tugging at the hem of her kimono in mortification. "Sh-shut up!" she snapped, turning away in embarrassment. "Megumi-san made it... It's one of her new designs..."

When Megumi had placed the finishing touches on her and Sakura's dresses for the wedding, Naruto had rejoiced in the fact that she was finally safe. Unfortunately she'd soon learned that her rejoicing was premature. Megumi had accomplished the task her mother in law had set for her upon their arrival to Tokushima, but the fashion designer still had plenty of designs and ideas rattling around in that devious head of hers. Powerless against her methods of persuasion - who knew that Megumi was a master of the Puppy Dog Eyes Jutsu? - Naruto had no choice but to endure even more fittings. Tired of the traditional wedding attire, Megumi had turned her designs toward themes. Naruto had been dressed in several different costumes, all seemingly more ridiculous than the last.

Fortunately, the torture only lasted a few hours. The wedding, after all, was only a day away. When the time came to put the finishing touches on Kanae's wedding gown, the blonde was finally released back into the wild - free to go wherever she willed. But where to go? Although Megumi was now indisposed, there were still the Twin Terrors to consider. Being the experienced escape artist that she was, Naruto knew she had to go somewhere they wouldn't find her. Sakura had fallen prey to their brainwashing, and Kakashi-sensei and Ero-sennin were likely to turn her in just for laughs. Iwano-baasama was their grandmother, so that only left one person with whom she might possibly be safe...

...loathe as she was to admit it.

"Why are you wearing that?"
She turned back to face him only to find him glaring in the opposite direction. "Cuz... she told me to," she answered, feeling the response to be a bit silly even as the words left her mouth. "...said she wanted to know how ninja-functional it could be or somethin..."

"But why are *you* wearing it?"

Naruto blinked; did he want Sakura to be wearing it? Willing herself not to ask the question out loud - after the Oiroke no Jutsu stunt at the inn, she'd promised Sakura she was going to behave - the blonde merely huffed in exasperation. "I certainly don't *wanna* be," she answered with a frown. "But she told me to... and Ryu-san asked me help out 'cuz he said all this fashion stuff keeps her busy and calm, and Iwano-baasan said somethin' about giving Kanae-san a break... even though I don't really get any of it..."

Throughout her whole rant, Sasuke had turned his gaze back to her, studying her attire once more. He recalled noting how *girly* she had looked sans her jacket back during that moment in the Chuunin exams. The form fitting vest she'd worn had rid him of any illusions he'd had regarding the whole 'I'm a girl' thing being just another prank. The new knowledge made him a little uncomfortable, but the given the situation at the time - he'd been more concerned about beating Gaara (so that he could face her later on in the Finals, honestly) - he hadn't allowed himself to give it anymore thought. Naruto may have been a girl, but she was still a moron.

Then there had been the funeral. She'd shown up beside Sakura in the normal kunoichi attire, no orange in sight. Her mood had been so somber - idly he remembered she'd been rather close with the Sandaime - even her blonde hair seemed more subdued. Yeah, she might have been an annoying idiot, but he realized then that even she knew how to grieve. Seeing her talking with Iruka, the anguish on her face as she tried to come to grips with what he was telling her, Naruto had almost seemed... normal...

After that day the questions he'd had regarding the blonde seemed to double in number, frustrating the young prodigy because they had more to do with her as a whole than the impossible things she had seemed to accomplish within the past days. He couldn't understand why it angered him to know that Gaara had seemed more interested in fighting her than him, and it confused him as to why he had felt protective of the blonde when Hyuuga Neji had inquired after her. Certainly the blonde was his teammate - as the highest ranking member of the three man squad, of course it was his responsibility to keep the dead last out of trouble - but why should it have mattered what other people thought of her?

It shouldn't have mattered. He didn't *want* it to matter! He was supposed to be an Avenger! And Naruto... Naruto was supposed to be the dumb moron who always said the stupidest things, always did things wrong, pulled stupid pranks--

An image a tall, naked blonde clothed in nothing but conveniently positioned wisps of smoke slammed into his mind, causing him to jerk in his seat.

Naruto blinked at him, frowning in confusion. "What the heck's wrong with you?"

He scowled, looking away with an angry glare. Dobe... "You look ridiculous, that's what."

She sneered back in response. "Well, let's put you in a dress and see how *you* look!" she snapped. "Asshole..."

Sasuke merely scoffed, trying his best not to think about the fact that that horrid prank jutsu was now permanently etched in his memory. A loud, long yawn came from the blonde's direction and he directed another scowl towards her. "Don't fall asleep on me again," he growled.
"I'm not, I'm not!" she protested loudly. "Sheesh! And to think I came out here for a little peace and quiet - maybe I should go call Ryu-san's sisters.... I'm willing to bet they'll make better company than you!" The other genin's angry glower was enough to set her hair on fire. Naruto merely laughed out loud, raising her hands in surrender. "Or not! Maa, maa... Neechan would kill me if I set the wolves on her precious 'Sasuke-kun'!"

The Uchiha paused, looking thoughtful. "You still haven't told her what happened," he muttered quietly. "Have you?"

She cocked her head again. "Happened when?"

Memories of his fight with his brother in the Otafuku hotel corridor, mixed in with flashes of his recent dream, flashed through his head before he glanced down at his feet with another scowl. "Never mind..."

Naruto regarded him with a curious frown for a few silent moments before letting out another loud yawn.

"Stop that."

"I can't help it!" she protested, pushing back a kimono sleeve to rub a hand through her hair. Idly she marveled at how easy a feat that was - the hair products the Twins used were even more effective than Sakura's. 'And they don't smell like Strawberries either!' "I'm beat! I've been using Kawarimi, Henge, and Kage Bunshin all day!"

Sasuke twitched slightly, once again reminded of her almost impossible stamina. "What for?" he asked.

"Just helping out with stuff," she answered. "And sneaking away from Megumi-san every once in a while... That woman's relentless - and her daughters even more so!"

Even Sasuke had to agree he felt the same in that respect. Even though they'd deemed him too young to date, that hadn't stopped them from openly trying to flirt with him.

Sighing, Naruto leaned back against the window. "It's just my luck that they've turned Neechan into one of their henchmen! I swear, she hasn't turned her back on me for a second!"

"She was out with the assistant earlier," Sasuke blinked, surprised at himself for even speaking aloud. What did it matter to him what Sakura was doing? She was leaving him alone, right?

"I'm surprised you noticed," Naruto remarked casually. "I thought you'd be glad to have one less fangirl breathing down your neck." Again Sasuke scowled. This time she merely rolled her eyes. "Aw, don't give me that! Y'know, the only reason those girls hounded after you so much is cuz they thought they had a chance at you."

He snorted. "I don't have time to waste on some idiots with nothing better to do with their time."

"Yeah... they were kinda dumb," Naruto agreed. "I mean, it's you after all..."

He scowled again. "Shut up, Dobe."

"Seriously!" she grinned, ignoring the vein twitching just above his brow. "If you had just picked one of them to be your 'girlfriend', the rest would've left you alone eons ago."
"Yeah right," he scoffed. "And be stuck with some groupie following me around all day..."

Naruto glanced at him, trying not to roll her eyes. 'Sheesh, you're so full of yourself...' Despite his initial rudeness and arrogance, at least Neji was now making attempts at polite conversation - stiff and awkward though it was... Still, this was the longest conversation the blonde could ever recall having with her teammate that hadn't ended in the two of them resorting to blows. She should at least try to make the most of it - and perhaps do a little henching of her own...

"Well then," she replied calmly. "I s'pose you should be glad that Sakura's calmed down, ne?"

Sasuke's head snapped around to her once more, his dark eyes narrowing.

"After all, she and Ino were the worst of the lot, always pushing and shoving at each other trying to get to you. It's gotta be a relief knowing you don't have to worry about either of them jumping out of a bush to get at you."

The Uchiha didn't answer, his gaze fixed at some unknown point in the distance.

"S'matter, Sasuke?" she asked. "Don't tell me you actually miss having some girl hanging all over you?"

~ "Whaddya think, Sasuke-kunnn?" ~

~ "Sa-Sasuke... you're all right...?" ~

~ "Sasuke... You shouldn't have -- you took way too many hits already!" ~

~ "Leave him alone! Don't you dare hurt Sasuke!!" ~

Sasuke stiffened, several thoughts running too rapidly through his mind for him to process. Deciding he had spent enough time in the blonde's company - he rose to his feet with a scowl in his face. He jumped down from the rooftop - leaving a puzzled blonde behind - as he muttered under his breath...

"I think I liked you better when you were just a moron..."

Did he realize that she'd heard him? Naruto watched him go with a thoughtful frown on her face. Mulling his words over in her head, she figured he had a bit of a point. 'Well... things certainly were easier...'

---

"Kyaaaa! Today is the day, today is the day! Big Brother is getting married!"

"Waaaaaiiii, I can't believe it! I'm so excited!"

Sakura merely smiled at the two older girls, though inwardly she was getting a bit annoyed by all the squealing they were doing. A quick glance at her twitching teammate indicated she probably felt the same - although that could have been more a result of all the pinning and tugging her poor hair was undergoing to stay in its current style.

"You okay there, Naru-kun?" she asked, trying to hold back a grin and failing.

The blonde only responded with a look sour enough to curdle milk.

"I'm sorry, Uzumaki-chan," Mitsuko replied as she did the finishing touches on the style - a
The blonde flushed, muttering a half-hearted apology while her teammate laughed out loud.

"I hafta say," Michiko giggled. "You both look absolutely adorable! Okaasan really did a great job on your outfits!"

"You really think so?" Sakura gushed, rising to her feet to survey her appearance in the full length mirror on the other side of the room. The fashion designer had chosen a light pink, chiffon cap-sleeved dress with a rose colored ribbon laced around her neck and front. The hem of the dress ended just above her knees, showing off her legs. In her ears she wore pink rosette earrings and on her feet were rose, open toed flats showing off pearlescent nail polish.

"Yup!" Naruto answered, a smile finally making its way across her face at seeing her teammate look so pleased. At least she was getting some enjoyment out of this - quite frankly the blonde was ready for the whole thing to be over. "You look really nice, Neechan."

The pink-haired kunoichi beamed at the compliment. "Thanks!" she exclaimed. "You look pretty good yourself!"

"Yes, yes, Uzumaki-chan!" Mitsuko exclaimed, clasping her hands together. "You are our crowning achievement!"

"True, true!" chorused Michiko. "You're going to be the belle of the ball! Aside from Kanae-chan, of course!"

"Um, thanks...?" Naruto murmured, reaching up to finger the flower behind her ear only to have her hand lightly batted away. "What do we do now?"

"Now?" A wide grin spread across Michiko's face. "Now we go get our Big Brother married!"

--

Kakashi regarded his three subordinates with a wide grin that remained concealed behind his usual black mask. "Well now," he drawled out. "Don't you all look adorable!"

Only one of his students smiled; the second flushed while the remaining one merely glowered.

"Do we have orders?" Sasuke ground out, glaring out at all the finely dressed people milling about the open pavilion. He got that it was a wedding and all, but if they were going to be doing guard duty behind the scenes, why did they have to dress up? It wasn't anything he wasn't used to, but he was well aware of all the looks he kept getting from the Twins and several other girls within their age range at the sight of him in a tux. Why couldn't the old lady have gone with a traditional Shinto wedding?

"Hmm... not really..." Kakashi answered blandly as he adjusted the cufflinks of his own suit, a finely tailored black number with a deep blue vest and tie - inwardly laughing at the way the young prodigy twitched in dismay. "While we are providing guard detail, Iwano-sama requested we try and blend in with the crowd. Be alert, but try to have a little fun..."

"Feh, asshole wouldn't know fun if it bit him in the ass... Ow! Don't pull the hair, Neechan!"

"Then watch your language!"
"Yes, yes... you've gotta act like a lady today, brat," The four ninja looked up at the approach of Iwano Miyako and Jiraiya, both dressed in traditional wedding finery. The council woman was garbed in a silvery gray irotomesode with a white and light purple orchid pattern printed on the hem and sleeves. A dark purple obi was tied elaborately around her waist with a matching comb in her hair. Jiraiya wore a dark gray juban, a maroon hakama, with dark gray tabi and finely made zori sandals. Over the outfit he wore a black haori with some sort of mon displayed on the back. Though his hair was in its normal unruly state, gone was the head plate bearing the kanji for oil.

Naruto blinked at her would-be mentor, barely able to process the change in his attire. "Wow, Ero-sennin," she mused. "You almost look respectable!"

Iwano laughed.

The Toad Sage pulled a face before giving the blonde a once over with a grin. "Same could be said about you, runt," he chuckled. "How long did it take to fight you into that number?"

Grimacing, Naruto bit back a retort as she plucked absently at the whimsy material covering her person. Megumi had dressed her in bright blue, ankle length satin. The dress had an empire waist with delicate bead work around the front, complete with a shimmery layer of chiffon that seemed to flutter on its own with every bit of movement. Sakura and the Twins had oohed and ahhed the moment she stepped out in it, telling how pretty it made her look.

Honestly, Naruto would have preferred the half-kimono. Even though she was essentially covered, the airiness almost made her feel naked; it was just plain weird!

'Besides... *I feel like I'm gonna trip in this stupid thing!*' A hand fell into her line of vision, rousing her out of her thoughts. She blinked at Kakashi who was studying the flower behind her ear as if was the most fascinating thing in the world. "Kakashi-sensei...?"

He blinked slowly, before meeting her gaze with a crescent eyed grin. "Who picked out the flower?"

"Naru-kun did!" Sakura grinned, giving the blonde's shoulder an encouraging squeeze. "I think she's starting to get a hang of this fashion stuff!"

"That's what you think!" Naruto protested with a snort. "I still don't know squat about fashion - but I do know plants. Irises are my favorite flowers."

Jiraiya and Kakashi both stilled, exchanging looks over the genin's heads.

Before anyone could comment any sort of comment however, Isamu approached the group with a greeting smile. His eyes falling on the two kunoichi of Team 7, his smile widened into a grin. "Haruno-san, Uzumaki-san, you both look great!"

Both girls blushed and smiled. Their male teammate kept his face completely blank.

"I just wanted you all to know that we're going to be starting soon," Megumi's assistant continued. "Feel free to take your seats when you're ready."

"All right then," Jiraiya said with a grin, gallantly extending his arm to Iwano-san. The elder woman laughed, accepting his arm with an appreciative smile. "I've got my date. Why don't the rest of you kids pair up so's we can get this show on the road?"

Naruto moved to stand beside Kakashi, turning to her teammates with an immature grin. "Sorry, Neechan, asshole... looks like you two are stuck together tonight."
Sasuke merely rolled his eyes and trudged out to the sitting area. Sakura followed after him, although not before turning back to Naruto to mouth the words 'thank you' with a happy grin.

--

For someone who had never witnessed a wedding ceremony before, Naruto thought it went surprisingly well. The ceremony itself had not been overly long and drawn out as she had initially expected it would be - apparently Kanae-san had been quite serious about wanting to get a head start on her life together with Ryu - but short and sweet. The bride and groom had lit a few candles, shared a little sake, and after exchanging their vows were officially deemed man and wife. Granted, Naruto didn't profess herself to be an expert on the subject, but she felt it was a safe to say that she had never seen any other two people more in love with each other than Tsukishiro (Iwano) Ryu and Kanae. The happiness on their faces was so tangible, the small blonde found herself grinning just at the sight of it.

Kakashi appeared beside his student, two glasses of punch in hand. He smiled inwardly at the wide smile on her face; it was nice seeing her in a genuinely happy mood for a change. So many of her wide prankster grins were merely for show... "See something interesting?" he asked.

She shrugged, accepting the drink with a nod of thanks. "I'm just glad Kanae-san and Ryu-san's wedding went off without a hitch," she answered. "They're gonna be really happy together."

'The wedding's not over yet,' the jounin told himself, but outwardly made a noncommittal sound. Why spoil the girl's mood?

Naruto quickly scanned over the crowd of people in attendance, easily spotting her comrades from Konoha. Jiraiya was with Iwano-sama and Megumi-san, chatting up a group of tittering middle-aged women - the ex-fashion designers contemporaries, no doubt. A few more seconds of searching yielded a flash of pink, allowing the blonde to zero in on her two teammates. Sakura and Sasuke were on the other side of the pavilion, seated at the end of a row of folded chairs. At first glance it looked like they were talking to each other, but then Isamu appeared out of the crowd and then began a discussion with the pink-haired kunoichi.

Sasuke did not look the least bit pleased at this.

Blue eyes blinked in confusion. What was his problem now?

The Jounin beside her was also studying the other two genin, an amused expression evident in his visible eye. Glancing down at the genin beside him, he patted her lightly on the head with a soft chuckle. "You shouldn't fix your face like that, Naruto," he chided jokingly. "None of the boys are going to ask you to dance."

The young blonde froze, staring up at him in something akin to horror. "Whuuuhhh?"

Kakashi's eye crinkled into a crescent grin. "Oh come now, with how you're all dressed up you didn't think you were gonna turn some heads?" He held back a chortle at the blonde's rapidly reddening face. It was a little startling to see the quick-witted blonde so easily rattled, but he had to admit it was a little fun also. He was tempted to make an Icha Icha reference, but decided against it at the last moment. Despite her infamous Oiroke no Jutsu, Kakashi had a feeling Naruto was almost as uptight as Maito Gai! "Honestly, you look very nice. You haven't noticed anyone checking you out?"

A blinking look was his response. "Checking me out for what? Weapons?"
The Jounin nearly fell over.

--

"Are you sure, miss?"

Sakura smiled politely at the boy who'd just asked her to dance. "No thank you," she said softly. "I'm not a very good dancer." Waiting until he was out of earshot, she let out a sigh of exasperation as she muttered under her breath, "Goodness! What is this - Ask the Wallflower to Dance day?" That was the third boy she'd turned down in the last hour! She'd never gotten so much attention back in Konoha...

'And certainly not from the one boy I *want* to notice me...' It took a conscious effort not to glance over at the brooding boy beside her. She'd had a very nice interesting conversation with Isamu regarding photography. It was obvious the older boy took a lot of pride in his work and Sakura found it refreshing to have a conversation with someone regarding non-ninja related issues for once. However, all throughout the conversation she couldn't help but feel the tense vibes radiating from the boy beside her.

While he was no ninja and probably couldn't sense chakra if his life depended on it, Isamu seemed to eventually realize that his presence what not desired by the dark haired boy and finally took his leave - not before securing one dance from Sakura before the end of the night. The entire time her prodigy had not spoken a single word.

Was it possible that he was jealous? 'Yeah right, Sakura... wishful thinking..' Holding back a sigh, the kunoichi willed herself not to overthink things - determined to spend what little alone-time she could with her Avenger. After all, when was another opportunity going to come up like this again?

Unaware of her thoughts, Sasuke glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. While the thought of Sakura dressed up didn't seem too farfetched - a thought that should have distressed him far more than it did - he had to admit he wasn't quite sure how to process the information. In his thoughts, his teammate had always worn that red cheongsam and standard issue sandals, her hitai-ate resting on the crown of her head. However this new Haruno Sakura was quiet and demure, dressed in pink from head to toe, putting him in mind of the flower that was her namesake.

He didn't like it. Nor did he like the fact that others did. He'd silently endured Megumi's assistant coming over and making small talk, attempting to distract himself by monitoring the crowds for any signs of trouble. They were on a mission after all - didn't he see that they didn't have time to waste on him? Eventually he seemed to take a hint and made himself scarce - however others seemed to take it upon themselves to take his place.

The Uchiha held back a growl of frustration. He didn't have time for this!

"Oh!"

The startled cry from the girl beside him rousing him out of his thoughts, Sasuke turned to his teammate to find her staring off into the crowd with a wide-eyed expression on his face. Following her gaze to find out what was the matter, the sight that met his gaze left a sour feeling in his gut and his neck twinging in annoyance.

Just what the hell did she think she was doing...?
It was decided - everyone really was out to get her. First Iwano Megumi setting her evil sights on her, and then Iwano-sama encouraging her... Worse yet, there was her own Nee-chan, brainwashed into their evil clutches to then join forces with the evil twins of terror, Michiko and Mitsuko. Jiraiya seemed to be getting a kick out of her suffering because he seemed to break out laughing every time he laid eyes on her. Now it seemed as if Kakashi was getting in on the action!

First, the droopy eyed jounin had suggested that she find someone to dance with. Her? Dance? Before she could tell him just how ridiculous that idea was, he'd given her a quick shove, sending her tumbling into some unsuspecting sucker in the crowd. Fortunately she was saved from falling flat on her face (She was a ninja! Why was the simple act of standing on heels so freaking difficult?!) by the boy and his surprisingly quick reflexes. After righting her and assuring himself that she was fine, he'd politely inquired as to what had caused her to fall.

At this point Kakashi had taken it upon himself to interrupt and bold-facedly lie by saying that he'd been attempting to teach her to dance with little success. He'd then gone on to convince this boy to give it a try. The whole thing had happened so quickly and before she could find the breath to object she was being lead out onto the floor, a crescent-eyed jounin waving at them as they went. Somehow she'd find a way to get vengeance...

"Are you all right, miss?"

Thoughts of suitable forms of prank justice fled from her mind, Naruto turned her attention back to the boy in front of her. He wore pristine white hakama underneath a dark, forest green haori. He had dark blue shaggy hair pulled back out of his face in a short tail at the back of his neck. He gazed down at her curiously, sky blue eyes shining in amusement.

"I'm fine..." she muttered, horrified at the thought of the pink flush she knew was spreading across her cheeks. "I just don't think I'm cut out for dancing, is all..."

"Actually, you're doing very well, I think," he answered, smiling lightly. "Your uncle made it seem as though you were clumsy, but you're actually very graceful."

The blonde grinned, whether at the thought of the cause of her gracefulness or an 'Uncle' Kakashi she couldn't be sure. "Thanks," she answered. "You're a good teacher; where'd you learn?"

He closed his eyes briefly. "My mother," he answered. Something skirted briefly across his face and Naruto recognized it enough not to press the issue. After a few brief moments it passed and he opened his eyes again to meet her with a small smile. "It's been a while since I've danced though."

Naruto nodded, allowing him to spin her around. The material of her dress fluttered around her as she moved and she flushed again, missing the smile he gave in response. Just as he was about to lead her into another step, Naruto slipped on her heel and tumbled straight into his chest.

Then, all Hell broke loose.

--

Kakashi tensed in alarm as a high-pitch wail cut through the soft music of the reception, freezing everyone in their tracks. The band came to a halt and people scattered from the floor as a burly figure dropped down into the middle of the crowd with a heavy thud. Before anyone could question his actions, however, he sprung away with a burst of chakra, a pale-faced, frightened, and crying little girl secured tightly under one muscular arm.
'A kidnapping? In broad daylight?' the jounin scowled inwardly as he began wading through the panicked crowd. 'That takes guts!' He began searching across the area for Jiraiya to assure that their client was still safe when a flash of blonde darted off after the mystery-nin. "NARUTO!"

The blonde paid him no heed, vanishing over a neighboring rooftop.

'Damn it!'

--

This time Naruto ignored the way the light material of her dress fluttered up around her body as she moved. Putting on another burst of speed, she vaulted over another rooftop, making sure to keep the muscular ninja in her sights. He'd managed to cover a lot of distance with his chakra-induced leaps, bringing them out of town into a woodsy area full of tall trees. From her initial observation, the other ninja - a rogue from Iwa by the looks of his hitai-ate - looked strong, but he was a bit on the slow side in terms of speed. That coupled with the added weight of an unwilling passenger, made it so Naruto was easily able to close the distance between them. His captive, a young dark haired girl who looked even younger than Moegi, caught her gaze first. Fear and panic were evident in her wide eyes and she reached out her hands to the blonde in a plaintive 'please help me' gesture.

Naruto was not about to let her down.

'You wanna crash weddings and snatch little kids, Mr. Muscle?' She stared at the man's back with an angry scowl. 'Then let's go wild!' Leaping forward, the blonde brought her hands up into a oft-used hand sign, letting out a familiar cry of, "KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!"

--

Kaji had expected to be followed the moment he'd left the wedding pavilion - after all, they'd known their target was not traveling alone - but he certainly hadn't expected to be have his pursuer catch up so soon. Nor did he expect the heeled shoes that rammed into his back, slamming him into the ground.

Though the blow had been heavy - it had knocked a sturdy guy like him to the ground, after all - he was able to recover quickly. Shaking his head to regain his bearings, he rose to his feet to face his attacker... only to gawk at the tiny figure facing him. "What the hell...?"

The little thing was barely half of his height, dressed in a flimsy blue gown and matching heels. Kunai in hand, she scowled at him, waiting for him to make a move. "You've gotta be kidding me," he scoffed. "There's no way a pip-squeak like you managed to drop me like that!"

The little blonde scowled, her blue eyes sharpening like steel. "Ohh trust me, big guy," she snarled. "I'm gonna do worse than that!"

--

She stared up at her rescuer, a shiny haired blonde in a shimmering gown, with wide teary eyes of gratitude. "Thank you!" she exclaimed, wrapping her arms around the older girl's shoulders as she jumped from tree to tree. "You saved me!"

"No problem, little missy!" the blonde grinned, coming to a stop on a low hanging branch. "Although we're not out of the woods yet!"

"Figuratively or literally..." The two girls turned, their gazes falling on the slim figure that touched
down a tree branch a few meters away. She bore a scratched hitai-ate from Kirigakure, although half of it was obscured by purple bangs that fell halfway down her face. She gazed at them with a gleaming brass-colored eye, her pierced lip curling upward in a predatory smile.

Naruto met her one-eyed gaze head on, her blue eyes unflinching. She tightened her hold on the girl in her arms, shifting her weight slightly. "Hold on tight to me, okay," she murmured. The little girl nodded.

The older ninja cocked her head. "Do you really think I'm gonna let you get away?" she chuckled. "You have something that belongs to us."

"That a fact? What do you want with her?"

The mist-nin smirked. "I don't think that's any of your business."

"Hn..." the blonde pretended to look thoughtful. "Sorry, but I don't think I can accept that answer..."

"Pity." The purple-haired kunoichi shot towards them in a blur of speed. Naruto sprung backwards to evade, her eyes widening when she heard the crack of what sounded like a whip, followed by the sound of the tree branch she was currently standing on giving way beneath her.

'Shit!' Jumping backwards once more, the Konoha genin used chakra to stick to the tree's trunk, then used it as a springboard to vault over to another tree. Hiking up the hem of her dress, she reached for several shuriken she tucked into a holster on her thigh.

"Ooh, resourceful little thing," the woman purred. "Aren't we, precious?"

The little girl in Naruto's arms let out a yelp of dismay at the sight of the nukenin appearing in front of them. The genin's eyes widened in surprise. 'Damn, she's fast! I guess to make up for the old slowpoke back there...'

Another rush of memories suddenly hit her full force, and the blonde realized that her clones were still battling with the Rock-ninja. She frowned inwardly; just what were a rogue Rock-ninja and a Mist-ninja doing working together anyway?

"Better pay attention, precious!"

There was another whip crack, and Naruto felt a sharp stab of pain against her leg that caused her to miss her next branch jump point. With another muttered expletive, the blonde tumbled towards the ground, turning her body so that she would take the brunt of the fall.

"Damn it, that hurt!" Naruto risked a quick glance at her calf, eyes narrowing at the hair-line cut marring the pale skin. What the heck had she been hit with?

"Oh, please don't scrunch your pretty face up like that, precious," the Mist-ninja crooned. "You'll get wrinkles."

Wincing at the pain, but confident the injury would be taken care of soon enough, Naruto rose to her feet and placed the little girl behind her in a protective gesture. "Thanks," she muttered. "But I'm willing to bet that's the least of my worries..."

"True enough," the older kunoichi sniffed. "Tell you what - stand aside now and I won't have to cut your face up."
"Not gonna happen," Naruto snarled. "Either one of those things."

"So stubborn." Sighing, the older woman raised her arm, the dark blue sleeves of her high-collared trailing in the air. Naruto knew she was building up chakra for an attack, but for the life of her she couldn't figure out what it was - she wasn't even using hand signs! Seeing her puzzled expression, the woman grinned again. "Don't worry," she said. "You'll find out soon enough!"

Several things happened in a quick succession. The mist-ninja brought her arm down, a whip-like crack filling the air once more. Naruto could see something rushing towards them from her extended hand, but before she could even decide whether or not to evade it, the attack was cut short by a quick flash of steel.

"...the hell...?"

A figure appeared between them, a gleaming sword held tightly in one hand. Naruto stared at his back, the dark blue shaggy hair and forest green haori bringing her up short. "No way..." she awed. "You...?"

The girl behind her let out an elated gasp. "Big Brother!"

~ End Chapter 33
Team 7's next mission involves a Samurai who has no love for ninja.

Surely Konoha's number 1 knucklehead will find a way to change his mind?

"That stupid, stubborn, headstrong... Argh!"

Sasuke ignored the disjointed ramblings of the pink-haired kunoichi behind him, keeping his attention on the trees blurring past them. After that strange ninja had made off that little girl, the open pavilion had erupted into complete pandemonium. Given that there were numerous celebrities and wealthy dignitaries present among the invited, it was no surprise that there would be the fear of any one of them being next. Everyone had scattered in various directions, fearing for their safety. Fortunately, no other ninja arrived to take more hostages, giving the ninja from Konoha time to briefly regain their bearings.

Once they made certain that Iwano-sama and her family members were safe and accounted for, Kakashi quickly ordered the two genin off after their wayward teammate.

The pair took off, easily tracking their quarry along a destructive trail of overturned trees and wrecked foliage.

Sakura paid little attention to the carnage, fuming silently at the impetuousness of whisker-faced blondes. "I can't believe she would just go off on her... Grr... when I get my hands on her..." The pair broke through a grouping of trees just in time to see their teammate backhanded away from the large, muscle bound nukenin. Startled at the sight, Sakura let out a sharp gasp of alarm, "NARUTO!"

The blonde hurtled backwards, plowing into the ground before disappearing with a familiar poof.

"No worries, Neechan!" Another blonde dropped down beside them, a fox grin fixed in place on her whiskered face. "Ol' big, tall, an' ugly isn't gonna get the best of me that easily!"

A shadow clone... The pink-haired kunoichi let out a brief sigh of relief. "Thank goodness," she murmured, watching as two more clones dropped down out of the trees, grabbing the older nin by the arms as a third clone drove a fist into his stomach. "Where's the little girl?"

"With the Original," the clone nearest her answered. "We don't know what's going on but she's definitely not alone."

"What do you mean?" Sasuke asked, frowning.

"The big guy's got help," the clone answered, frowning as well. "Another nukenin... but this one's from Kirigakure."

The other two genin of Team 7 frowned in confusion. A Mist nin and Rock nin working together...?
And what was it about that little girl that was so important?

Before they could ponder this thought too deeply, a loud commotion drew their attention to the east, where one of the tall trees creaked and shuddered before falling beneath the canopy with a loud thud. The two genin stared at each other, the same thought running through their mind, 'Naruto...'

Sasuke unfastened his tie and unbuttoned his suit jacket, tossing both articles of clothing to the side. "Hey, Sakura," Green eyes zeroed in on him but he kept his gaze on the big bruiser in the distance. "Go help the moron... and take this doofus with you."

"Oi!" the blonde clone scowled at him.

"You sure, Sasuke-kun?" she murmured softly, starting slightly when red Sharingan eyes narrowed at her.

"Get going," he ordered with a scowl. "I'll handle this."

Giving him a quick nod, Sakura turned and headed off in the original blonde's direction, the kage bunshin making a rude hand gesture as it followed behind. Tossing a quick glance over her shoulder, Sakura bit her lip in worry. 'Be careful... Sasuke-kun...'

--

"Big Brother!"

The dark haired boy who had suddenly come to their rescue turned, light blue eyes falling on Naruto briefly before landing on the little girl behind her. "You all right, Ran?" he asked softly.

Naruto glanced down at the little girl who nodded with teary eyes full of relief. "Miss rescued me!" she exclaimed, hugging the blonde's arm in gratitude.

"How sweet," the Mist ninja cooed. "Playing the Good Samaritan bit? Too bad it's gonna get you killed, little precious."

"It is not!" Naruto scowled. "And don't call me little!"

The older kunoichi giggled. "Aww, the little precious wants to play with the big ninja, eh?" Another predatory smile spread across her face. "Well then, your wish is my command!" She whipped her hands out once more, and finally Naruto could see what looked like whips of water rushing towards them.

Tensing her body to move, the blonde was surprised once again when the boy cut through the whips with a swift, downward slash of his sword. Studying the blade closely, blue eyes widened slightly at the slight glimmer of energy that seemed to arc through the old blade. 'Is that... chakra...?'

"Oh, so you're working together now, eh?" the woman chuckled. "Guess that means I'm gonna have to double my efforts!" Raising her arms so that her hands were visible outside of the long sleeves of her top, the Mist kunoichi ran through a rapid series of seals before letting out a soft whisper of, "Kirigakure no jutsu..."

Naruto tensed, grasping the little girl Ran by the shoulders. "Shit..."

The boy tensed as well, glancing at her as the area surrounding them began to vanish underneath a
thick veil of mist and fog. He raised his blade once more, holding it steadily in a defensive position. "What is this...?"

He didn't know...? She blinked at him, glad that he was close enough to see without any difficulty. "You're not a ninja...?"

"Of course not!" he snapped, as if he found the very idea offensive.

The blonde blinked; what had happened to the smiling boy she'd danced with just under an hour ago? "It's the Hidden Mist Technique," she explained. "It's used by a lot of Kirigakure ninja; they control the water in the air, making it so dense that their enemies can't tell up from down."

"Oooh, she knows her jutsu," the Mist ninja remarked from somewhere in the distance.

"I've tangled with Kirigakure-nin before," Naruto remarked idly, briefly remembering a rogue swordsman and the boy he used as his tool. "And they were certainly a lot tougher than you!"

"Oh, so you're not scared at all! I'm so hurt! I suppose that means I'm gonna hafta try a little harder!"

Using her other available senses, Naruto heard the attack before it came. Reacting quickly, she grabbed the two siblings, yanking them down to the ground. Seconds after they touched the forest floor, a whip of water swished by, slicing a considerable chunk out of the tree behind them.

Blue eyes surveyed the damage, blinking in surprise. "Wow..."

"Thank you..." the boy murmured uncomfortably. "You saved my life... I'm in your debt..."

"My debt...?" she blinked in confusion. "I don't even know your name..."

He paused, hesitating. "It's Shuya..." he said finally.

"Well, Shuya," she replied. "You don't owe me anything... You taught me to dance after all." He blinked, flushing slightly as Naruto lifted her dress hem once more, drawing out another kunai. "Do me a favor, though... Just try to stay alive for a few minutes, 'kay?" Rising to her feet, the blonde kunoichi brought her hands together into a cross seal once more, "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

--

He'd known stopping in Tokushima had been a gamble. They were being tailed every step of their journey; each move he made was monitored and the threat of failure was always imminent no matter what he did. He thought by coming to Tokushima, where the town was to be filled to the brim with travelers from across the five nations for the Iwano-Ito wedding, that they'd be able to blend in and have a bit of time to recoup and take a breather. Running for one's life was a very tiring excercise, especially when it was not only your life that you had to protect.

When he'd seen that big ninja make off with Ran his heart had frozen in his chest. Cursing himself over and over for lowering his guard for even the briefest of moments - he'd kept her in his sights all throughout his time on the dance floor, up until his cute dance partner tripped into him - he'd prepared to give pursuit only to balk in surprise when he was cut off by a flash of blue and blonde. He'd then watched in stunned surprise as the lithe little blonde with whom he'd been dancing jumped up onto the nearest column, vaulted off its side, and vanished over the side of the rooftop in pursuit of his little sister.

That same girl was now battling against an older woman, dozens of copies zipping around through
the thick fog, throwing punches and taunts as they went. Normal girls didn't move like that; certainly not dressed the way she was. Was she really a ninja?

A small hand crept out, clasping around his own. He turned his head slightly to meet that of the younger girl beside him. "Ran-chan..." What could he say to her? How could he apologize for failing her so terribly?

Her blue eyes focused on his, showing only love and understanding. It warmed and broke his heart at the same time. "It's okay, big brother," she said softly. "We'll be all right - Miss is gonna help us..."

He blinked, incredulous at her unwavering trust towards someone she'd just met. "She's a ninja..." he exclaimed.

"We can trust her," the little girl insisted. "She's got eyes like yours!"

He blinked again, remembering those blue eyes gazing up at him back during the reception. They really had been stunning... He halted that thought, shaking his head to rid himself of it. "That's not a reason to trust someone, Ran-chan," he replied. "That doesn't even make--"

A startled cry broke off his sentence, and he looked up as the mist around them gradually began to clear. He waited, tense and alert, for either one of the kunoichi to make their presence known. After a few seconds he wasn't disappointed. The Mist-nin touched down on the forest floor first, clutching an injured arm close to her side. She directed a sneer at him before allowing it to fall on the small blonde who touched down in front of them seconds later.

"Who the hell are you?" she hissed, her whole body tense in anger. Obviously this was not a woman accustomed to defeat; certainly not at the hands of a child.

"I'm Uzumaki Naruto," the blonde smirked. "And I'm gonna be the Greatest Hokage!"

The older kunoichi spat in distaste. "You're a nuisance, is more like it," she muttered to herself, scanning the trees. "Damn it, Kaji... fine time to not show up..."

"Your friend's a little tied up at the moment..."

The woman tensed again, her visible eye narrowing even further at the sight of another young girl touching down in the clearing. She was not about to get her ass handed to her by a bunch of toddlers in evening wear - she was a Chuunin for Kami's sake! "Well, precious," she hissed, keeping her eye on Naruto. "I'd like to say it's been fun, but I don't have any more time to play..."

Naruto narrowed her eyes, clenching her kunai tightly. "Leaving already?" she sneered.

"Oh don't worry, precious..." She paused, staring directly at Shuya and his sister before turning her gaze back to the blonde with a smirk. "I'll be back." With a quick series of hand signs, she vanished in a swirl of leaves.

"Good riddance!" Naruto snorted, attempting to brush away dirt and debris from her torn dress. While she hadn't been overly fond of it, it seemed a shame for it have to undergone so much damage...

"Naruto!" Sakura quickly rushed over to her side, eyes quickly scanning her for any sign of injury. "Are you all right?"

"Course I am, Neechan!" the blonde exclaimed, before turning her gaze on Shuya. "How about
"We're fine," he said stiffly, rising to his feet. Extending a hand to his sister, he checked her over for any injuries before turning back to them. Taking a step forward, he gave the blonde a stiff bow. "Thank you very much for your help, Kunoichi-san."

'Kunoichi-san...?' Naruto blinked at him. "Why are you being so stiff?" she asked.

"It's called having manners, moron." Sasuke replied as he touched down behind them, his usual scowl fixed to his face.

"Shut up, asshole!" Naruto exclaimed with a squinty-eyed glare, missing the narrow-eyed look her male teammate gave her. Shuya caught it but said nothing, watching as she then turned to fix her own assessing gaze back on him and his sister.

"Naruto..." Sakura began, her expression darkening. Now that her concern over her well-being had been assured, her frustration at her sudden departure was now returning. Sensing as if a cuff over the head was imminent, the blonde took a step back, chuckling hesitantly.

Ran let out a soft giggle. "You guys are funny!"

Both Sakura and Naruto paused, flushing in embarrassment.

"Where's the big guy?" the blonde finally asked, turning her attention back to Sasuke. The last memories from her clones had shown him facing off against him with Katon jutsu and several moves 'borrowed' from a certain Taijutsu master. She refrained from commenting on it, however; she was still a little unsure of how she felt about it.

"Unconcious and hog-tied," the Uchiha answered. "Though if they really are working together, that woman's probably already freed him."

Beside Naruto Shuya tensed, clasping his sister's hand in his own. They'd taken enough risks as it was; it was no longer safe here. "Ran-chan, we have to go."

"Yes, big brother."

"Go?" Naruto blinked. "Why are those ninja after you?"

He paused, frowning at her. "That's none of your concern,"

The blonde bristled at his short tone. "Hey, ya don't hafta be a jerk about it," she said with a frown. "Maybe we can help."

"We're already on a mission," Sasuke interrupted. "If he doesn't want our help, don't try and force it on him."

"Still," Sakura murmured softly. "It's obviously not safe for them out there right now with those ninja lurking about."

"Yeah!" Naruto added. "At least come back to the reception with us! Maybe we can help you figure something out!"

Shuya remained silent, gazing back at this... Uzumaki Naruto... A ninja... He frowned slightly; Ran claimed that she could be trusted. Could she really? "Why did you help us?"

"Why?" Blue eyes blinked at him. "Why wouldn't I? It was the right thing to do."
He inwardly scoffed at the thought. No one was that altruistic, certainly not a ninja. He'd learned that lesson the hard way. Still, given that their options were limited, what choice did he have? "Very well... We gratefully accept whatever assistance you are able to give us." He straightened his back, giving them all another formal bow. Ran did the same.

Naruto blinked again. Sooo stiff...! 'Sheesh... this guy's worse than Neji...' "Well, guys, I dunno about the rest of you, but I've had just about as much of this forest as I can stand," she exclaimed. "Whaddya say we head back and get some food?" She paused, turning to the little girl beside Shuya. "Ne... er, Ran-chan?"

"Yeah!" she exclaimed, grinning happily. "Can we fly? Like we did before?"

"Fly? You mean jump?"

She nodded eagerly. "That was so cool! Can you teach me how to do that? Please, please?"

"Ran,"

The little girl stilled, turning to her brother with an embarrassed grin. "Sorry, big brother."

Naruto studied the pair briefly before dropping down on one knee, turning her back to face the girl. "Well? All aboard!" she grinned. "Don't wanna miss your ride, do ya?"

Ran let out a happy squeal, jumping on and wrapping her arms around her neck. "I'm ready!"

The blonde turned back to a rather stunned looking Shuya, a curious grin settling across her face. "Can you keep up with us?" she asked. He nodded dumbly. "All right then," Bending her knees, Naruto shot off into the trees with a loud whoop, Ran squealing right along with her. "Let's goooo!"

The three remaining youths stared after them, varying thoughts running through their minds...

'That goofball...'

'That idiot...'

'Is that really the same girl I thought looked cute...?'

After tucking his sister safely into the bed the Iwano family had so graciously provided for them, Shuya quietly left the room and stepped out into the hall. There he was met by Iwano Kanae, who gazed at him with a kind and concerned smile. "How is your little sister?" she asked softly.

"She's fine," he answered quietly, giving a polite bow. The Iwano family had shown him and his sister such kindness. "Today was a bit much for her, but after a little rest she'll be fine."

The redhead actress nodded, worry still evident on her face. "I'm just so glad that she's all right..." she exclaimed. "When I saw that man make off with her..."

The young man said nothing, the image still replaying over and over in his mind. They'd had such a close call today; what would tomorrow hold for them...?

"...ya... Shuya-san...?"

He blinked, turning his attention back to the young woman in front of him. "Oh, I'm sorry, Kanae-
"It's all right," Kanae replied. Goodness, this boy was so polite! "I imagine you've had a rough day as well. Perhaps you should get some rest, too?"

"Yes, Kanae-dono, thank you." he agreed. Bowing once again, he retreated back to his room. "Good night."

"Good night," Watching as the door to their room quietly slid shut once more, Kanae turned in the direction of the sitting room. Though she was still a young woman - recently married, after all - the maternal instincts in her surged to the surface at the sight of that young man looking so exhausted and downtrodden. It wasn't right for him to have to face such hardships on his own, especially when he had his little sister to look after and protect as well. Something had to be done!

--

"...the poor thing's exhausted, I'm willing to bet it's just the two of them..."

"How awful! Are they really all alone? Where are their parents?"

Quietly entering the room, Kanae was not surprised to find it filled with her new family members and the ninja from Konoha. Apparently they were just as concerned about the situation as her, and were discussing what exactly to do about it. Her husband noticed her entrance almost immediately, rising to greet her with a kiss on the cheek.

"How are they doing?" he asked.

"Little Ran is asleep," she answered, sitting down at the low table where everyone was discussing the situation over tea. Megumi provided her a cup and she smiled softly in thanks. "Shuya-san just retired for the night - I do hope he'll be able to get some rest."

"Not likely," Iwano-sama replied. "He's just radiating tension and anxiety; I doubt he'll sleep more than a few hours."

"He's used to being on the run," Sakura remarked. "Because of those two ninja...?"

"There's more to it than that..." Jiraiya replied. The others glanced over at him. "Just take a look at him; his clothes, his mannerisms... very stiff, very formal... Atypical of your average orphan/runaway."

"He's probably from a well-to-do family... Nobility, perhaps?"

"So those ninja who were after them...?"

"No doubt have been hired to kidnap him and his sister..." the Sannin finished.

"He had a sword," Naruto muttered. All eyes turned to her. "He cut through that Mist Ninja's water whip like it was nothing."

Sakura blinked. "So he's a ninja?"

The blonde shook her head. "I asked, but he said no," She frowned in confusion, wondering at his almost hostile reaction to the question. What did he find so offensive about ninja anyway? Beside the fact that two had tried to kidnap his sister... "He didn't even know what Kirigakure no jutsu was."
"I see..."

Naruto turned back to the white-haired sage, frowning at the speculative look on his face. "You know something, Ero-sennin?" she asked.

"Hm, no, not yet..." he answered, gazing down into his tea cup as if it were the most fascinating thing he had ever seen. "But I have a theory; one that'll take a little looking into."

"So in the meantime?" Sasuke asked setting his teacup down on the table. He ignored the wink one of the Twins gave him as she floated by to refill it.

"Would it be possible to grant them asylum in Konoha?" Sakura asked Iwano-sama.

"Perhaps," she answered. "But we would need a little more information from our guests than he's been inclined to give. We can't just allow anyone extended stay within our village's walls without knowing whether or not they are a threat to our safety."

Naruto thought of Ran, the cute little girl with wild blue hair and a gap-toothed smile, finding it near impossible to imagine a single threatening bone in her body. However, realistically she knew that those ninja were after her and her brother for a reason - they couldn't really provide them any sort of assistance unless they knew why.

"Did he say anything to you, Kanae-san?" Kakashi asked. "About where he was going next?"

The redhead paused, trying to replay her brief conversation with the boy. He'd seemed genuinely contrite about the interruption of her wedding and had apologized profusely. The actress had insisted that there was no need for apologies, as she couldn't have found a better way to get the crowds heading home.

He'd smiled half-heartedly at her attempt at a joke, before asking to be shown to a room for his sleeping sister. After all, he didn't want to impose upon them and they really needed to get an early start. "He said they needed to head out early; they're headed north I believe. Shuya-san didn't say why, however..."

"Most likely he's trying to meet up with someone," the Copy ninja mused. "Probably a contact... somebody he can trust..."

Naruto began to tune out the rest of the conversation, her blue eyes intently focused on the open shoji door. Despite his quick change in attitude - on the way back to the estate, he'd still been decidedly cool towards them but overall polite - the blonde still found Shuya to be very interesting. He could move - he'd kept up with them on the way through the forest - and given the way he'd handled that sword it was obvious he could fight. How else had he managed to evade his pursuers for so long?

'But why the dislike for ninja?' she wondered to herself. 'I get that he's probably had some run-ins with a couple, but that's no reason to label us all bad...'

Normally such blatant prejudice would have immediately put the blonde off of him, but given his circumstances, Naruto decided to reserve her judgement. Besides... he couldn't be all bad...

'AFTER ALL... he treated me like a lady...'

--

The air was still damp from the early morning fog as Shuya and his sister crept quietly out of the
Iwano estate. He knew it was bad manners to leave so suddenly and unannounced, but it wasn't as if he'd really had a choice. The two of them had written a little note expressing their heartfelt thanks, leaving it in the sitting area for the Iwano Family to find, before making their way once more.

Taking a quick glance up and down the street, Shuya turned back to his sister, pausing in concern at the frown upon her cherubic face. "Ran-chan," he murmured quietly. "What's wrong?"

"I want to say goodbye to Miss Ninja," she answered, wringing her hands together.

Shuya inwardly sighed. The blonde kunoichi, Uzumaki Naruto as she had introduced herself, had been nothing but kind to Ran since their arrival - of course she would go and get attached. 'But so soon...? I've never seen her get so worked up over a stranger before...' He set down his pack, kneeling down before the younger girl with a sympathetic smile. "I know, Ran-chan, I know..." he replied, brushing her bangs out of her face soothingly. "But we can't do that..."

"Why not?" Shuya froze, spinning around to meet the bright gaze of the blue eyed kunoichi in question. She dropped down from the outer wall of the estate, her two teammates along with her, grinning mischievously. "We're not leaving ya yet, Ran-chan!"

Holding back a frown at the delighted expression in the young girl's eyes, Shuya eyed Naruto warily. "What are you talking about?" he asked. "Why are you here?"

"That's easy!" the blonde grinned. "We're your new bodyguards!"

All of his manners and decorum took a proverbial trip out the window as Shuya stood up, gawking at them with a loud, "Huh?!"

--

Iwano Miyako stepped out of her room later that morning, traveling pack in hand. She turned in the direction of Hatake Kakashi, a small knowing smile on her wizened face. "They've gone, haven't they?" she asked.

"They have," he answered.

"I expected as much," the old councilwoman replied. "That boy is definitely on a mission."

Kakashi nodded, tucking his hands into his pockets. "Speaking of missions," he remarked idly. "The one you purchased hasn't been completed - are you really all right with sending my team off on another one so soon?"

"No worries, Kakashi-san," Iwano-sama chuckled dryly. "I will take full responsibility for the change in plans and explain the circumstances to Godaime-sama personally."

The jounin inwardly let out a sigh of relief at this. Jiraiya had expected the Slug Mistress to be particularly pissed once she heard about the unannounced change - and if his horror stories were anything to go by, an angry female medic ninja was not someone he was looking forward to facing...

"Besides," the councilwoman continued. "With the generous gift of sake Kanae and Ryu so gracious sent on ahead of us, I'm sure Godaime-sama won't be too upset."

"Glad to hear it," Jiraiya chuckled, stepping out of his own room with his pack in hand. "Although I wonder if she wouldn't mind sharing some of that sake with me - it was pretty top quality."
'Good luck with that,' Kakashi thought with an inward grin.

"Are you all heading out now?" Kanae asked as she and the rest of the Iwano family approached the small group.

"Yes, my dear," Iwano-sama answered. "It's best to get an early start - although not as early as our young friends... I may be a sprite old lady, but even I still need my beauty rest!"

The redhead giggled.

"We're going to miss you, Obaachan!" Michiko exclaimed.

"Yes - we'll have to come and visit you in Konoha soon!" Mitsuko agreed.

"I'd love that, my dears," Iwano-sama grinned. "Although I wouldn't count on running into Uchiha Sasuke while you're there - he and his team are always out on missions."

"Oh poo!"

"Speaking of which," Megumi said with a smile. "I really wish I could have had the chance to thank Naruto-chan for all her help. I haven't come up with so many wonderful ideas in such a long time - she was such an inspiration!"

Kakashi closed his eye in a grin. "We'll be sure to pass the word along to her when we see her," he replied. "She'll be happy to hear it."

"Do you think you could also pass a gift along to her?" Ryu asked, holding out a box. Both Jiraiya and Kakashi quirked a brow in curiosity, and the dark-haired designer only smiled. "Don't worry, I have a feeling she might like it."

"What is it?" The young designer opened the box, revealing several articles of clothing, the majority of the material being a bright orange; a sleeveless bolero-style jacket with a red spiral emblem on the back and a hood of light blue that broke up the orange of the piece in a way similar to her current jacket. There was also a short sleeved black shirt - to be worn underneath the jacket - each shoulder bearing the same red spiral emblem. Next was an orange skirt with the same light blue trim, and a pair of black biker shorts to be worn underneath. The ensemble was completed with a pair of gloves - one orange and one blue - and a short pair of orange open-toed boots.

Although she hadn't been too impressed with any of the previous fashion creations she'd been presented - in the face of the blonde's ruined gown, Iwano Megumi had insisted she keep some of the specially designed items for 'special occasions' - both Kakashi and Jiraiya were certain...

Naruto was going to love it.

--

"Don't you just love this?" A man stepped into the small rented room, a scowl on his face directed to the occupants. He wore a faded blue gi and gray pants, along with the standard ninja fishnet underneath. His hair was a coppery color, cropped short and partially hidden underneath a scratched hitai-ate from Kumogakure, worn slightly off to the side.

Still licking their minor wounds from the altercation with the ninja from the Leaf, the two other missing nin tensed in apprehension at the expression on his face. There was no doubting the fact that this man, their Aniki, was the boss.
...And the boss was pissed!

"I trust the two of you not to foul things up and yet you manage to do the exact opposite!"

The bulky missing-nin from Iwa, Kaji, looked cowed under the smaller man's gray-eyed glare. "Sorry, Aniki," he grumbled. "There were complications..."

"Complications?" he murmured, stepping further into the room. He scowled even more, the angry looking scar that went from his left brow to his right cheekbone pulling slightly at the movement. He didn't seem to notice as he ran a hand across his stubbled chin in frustration. "Tell me how grabbing one little kid could have *any* complications whatsoever?"

"There were other ninja there," the kunoichi from Kirigakure murmured softly. "Guard escorts for one of the dignitaries, I guess."

"Escorts, huh? And they intervened?" That could prove a complication - still, it wasn't as if they'd stay involved for long. They had their own mission to carry out, right?

"One of 'em came alone at first," Kaji admitted. "Got the drop on me, grabbed the kid, and then started fightin' Yoko..."

The mist kunoichi hissed in irritation at the reminder of her loss.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, back up a mo'," their leader interrupted. "Another ninja managed to get the drop on you, Kaji? And what's this about fighting Yoko? How could they be if they were makin' off with the kid?"

"Kage Bunshin," Yoko answered, biting at a nail in frustration. "I've never seen anybody so little make so many clones! It seemed like there was no end to them!"

"Little? We talkin' about somebody young? What rank?"

"No idea," Kaji answered with a scowl. "But they were from Konoha - had to be. I know a Leaf ninja when I smell'em."

'Aniki' contemplated this; there was no question that Iwagakure ninja had no love for Konoha, even after so many years had past since the last war. If Kaji said they were from Konohagakure, he was probably right. "So, we got Konoha ninja involved with this...? Damn..." He frowned slightly... their client had given them explicit instructions to keep this under wraps. The odds of their target successfully seeking asylum anywhere had been slim to none at first - but now that those pacifist-loving tree huggers were involved...

"Do you think they know, Aniki?" Yoko asked.

"If not, they will soon." he frowned. He gazed at his two teammates and the injuries they had sustained; nothing major, but enough to give him cause for worry. They needed to get this mission over and done with quick before any more... complications... arose. "Yoko, Kaji."

"Yes, Aniki?" they chorused.

"Pack your crap. We're movin' out."

"Ryoukai!"
"Do it again, Sempai! Again!" Ran let out another delighted squeal of laughter as the blonde kunoichi added another small stone to the five she was already currently juggling. Young eyes remained lit bright in excitement as she added simple tricks to the routine - turning, hopping, juggling backwards, changing directions. The little girl had never seen anything like it and was completely enraptured.

Shuya watched his little sister, trying to withhold a smile at the obvious enthusiasm on her face. It was rare to see her happy over something so simple - juggling stones of all things... - but it in turn made him happy to see it...

Even if a ninja was the cause...

After a few more seconds, Naruto brought her act to a close. With rapid movements faster than Ran's eyes could track, she snatched five of the six stones out of the air, allowing the last - and smallest - to land harmlessly on the crown of her head. "Ouch! That one got me!"

Ran giggled again. "Careful, Miss Ninja! Don't hurt yourself!"

"No worries, Naru'll be just fine," Sakura teased with a grin. "It's just her head, after all."

"Mooouuuu, neechaaannn!" The pink haired kunoichi only stuck out her tongue impishly. "Sheesh... I get no respect at all!"

"Don't worry, Miss Ninja!" Ran exclaimed. "I respect you!"

Naruto grinned at the little girl, ruffling her hair. "Aww, thanks, Ran-chan! At least somebody out there likes me." Her and Shuya's eyes met briefly, before the boy turned his attention back to the trail they were on. Naruto studied him, her blue eyes contemplative. He'd maintained a calm and laidback composure whenever he held the attention of his sister, but the rest of his time had been spent tense and alert, as if he expected to be attacked at any given moment.

'Sheesh... so uptight!'

"So, Shuya," The boy paused, turning his eyes in her direction once more. They were blue, like hers, but a bit darker. There was a slight weariness there, and a wariness that Naruto found almost familiar.

~ "Your smile may be very open and carefree, but your eyes are so very sad. There is something that troubles you, isn't there? I know what it's like to hide behind a mask, you see." ~

Realizing she had the boy's attention - and her teammates' as well - Naruto quickly brought her mind back to the present. "Where'd you learn to move like that?"

Dark blue eyes blinked at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"With that chick from Mist," Naruto clarified. "You were moving pretty quick back there - you blocked those strikes of hers with your sword - hell, you moved like a ninja."

Shuya's eyes narrowed. "I am *not* a ninja."

"What are you then?" Sasuke asked.

The older boy stopped, straightening his back as he fixed him with a level stare. "I am a Samurai," he answered. "Like my father and his father before him."
"A samurai?" Naruto blinked, frowning slightly as she recalled all the shady swordsmen that had been under the corrupt businessman Gatou's employ. "You mean like a sword for hire?"

The boy's eyes darkened as he fixed her with a furious scowl. "Don't confuse me with some disgusting thug with a blade!" he snapped. "Samurai are honorable... we have integrity... we-we don't just go around swinging our swords for the hell of it! We fight for a purpose!"

The blonde met his gaze head on. "And so what makes you think ninja are so different?" she countered. Shuya blinked. "Yeah, we may take missions from different people, but we had a code, too - every ninja has their own nindou!"

"Nindou?" Ran echoed. "Like Bushido!"

"Bushi...do...?"

"The way of the samurai..." Shuya murmured softly. "The moral code that all honorable samurai live by. " Naruto noted how he stressed the word 'honorable'. "Chivalry, courage, respect, honesty, loyalty... Principles like these must be honored until death." He paused, grimacing slightly. "Unlike ninja who thrive on deceit..."

'That does it...' In a flash of movement, the blonde turned on her heel, grabbing Shuya by the edges of his haori, giving him an angry shake. "Just what the hell is your problem with ninja?" she growled. "I get that those two nukenin are after you for some reason, but why hold it against all of us?"

If he seemed at all startled by her action, Shuya's expression didn't show it. Prying her hands from his clothing, he took a step back from her, his eyes cold and hard as he finally spoke. "It's because of ninja that our entire clan is dead."

~ End Chapter 34
Chapter 35: The Way

Chapter Summary

Nindo vs Bushido... Are they really so different?

Chapter 35

A young servant entered into the room quietly, presenting a folded letter to the figure seated at a low, but elaborately ornate desk. The figure, an older man dressed in expensive robes, accepted the note, adjusting the small spectacles sitting on the bridge of his nose in order to read its contents more thoroughly. After a few moments, he set the note down with a frown.

"This is unacceptable," he snarled. "I'm not paying those fools to dillydally - I expect results!"

"Your orders, sir?" the servant murmured softly.

"Send word to the so called Joukuu-Koudo-Umi," he sneered. "Let them know that if they cannot handle this mission, I will find someone who can!"

"It will be done, Bouma-sama,"

--

Unlike most nukenin, Satoru did not become a missing nin in order to bring about change. He had no designs to become a kage, or assassinate the Daimyo, he'd really desire for revenge of any kind whatsoever. Nor had he been cast out, banished, or betrayed. He'd just left.

As a matter of fact, the day after he'd been promoted to Jounin and handed his vest by the Raikage himself, Satoru just decided that he was done being a Kumogakure ninja... and just left.

Being a nukenin had its disadvantages, of course. Every once in awhile he'd get confronted by tracker nin and bounty nin who'd stumbled across his picture in their bingo books and decided to turn him in. He really had no desire to return to Lightning Country, of course - there was no such thing as disavowing in Rai no Kuni. You served your country until you were dead. End of story.

Overall, Satoru was fine with that. After all, why go through all the trouble of becoming a ninja if you didn't plan on using those skills?

Still... it was one thing to use those skills for the things you wanted to do, and another to use them for fat-cat bureaucrats looking to make cash that they'd make sure their underlings never saw a cent of...

Heh... maybe he was a little like other nukenin after all. He didn't care what other people did with their skills or time, but Satoru was going to do what he wanted to do. He was going to follow his own path.

Was that his nindou...? Perhaps, not that he cared, of course. He didn't want to waste too much time on introspection. He had a job to do after all.
"Aniki,"

He glanced over his shoulder, gray eyes following on the dark-haired kunoichi from Kirigakure. He didn't know what had possessed the girl to leave her village and follow after him. Not that he'd ever bothered to ask her - she was useful, she and Kaji, and although he never pegged himself as much of a team player, some jobs went a lot easier when you had back up.

"Yeah?"

"When we catch up to those Leaf Ninja," Yoko's visible eye narrowed slightly; obviously she was still a little upset over their previous altercation. "Please let me handle it."

Satoru opened his mouth to speak, but Kaji beat him to the punch. "You?!” he snorted incredulously. "You couldn't even handle one little brat - how're ya gonna manage four?"

"Don't forget you're the one she got the drop on first, clumsy moron!” she hissed at him.

The muscular Iwa-nin merely rolled his eyes and smirked. "Kitty's got her claws out again, huh?" he snorted. "The punk just got lucky, is all. It won't happen again."

"It better not," Satoru murmured. "Remember how much money is riding on this job. How's it gonna look for us to get rolled by a bunch of punk kids?"

"We'll do better, Aniki!" Yoko exclaimed. "I promise we will!"

"You got that right, Aniki!" Kaji chimed in. "They won't know what hit'em!"

Satoru chuckled, though the humor didn't seem to meet his eyes as he fingered a pouch at his waist. "Heh... you got that right."

--

"It's because of ninja that our entire clan is dead."

All four youths fell silent as Shuya's words echoed across the small clearing. The young swordsman scowled, whether at his outburst or the cause for it, no one could be certain.

"Your entire family was killed by ninja?" Sakura asked, willing herself not to glance in her male teammate's direction. Kami only knew what kind of reaction that would cause.

"Slaughtered," Shuya snarled quietly. "Every single one of them."

"But why?"

"For years, the Miyamoto family's sworn duty was protect the Hiyami Clan, a wealthy family that resided just outside Kaminari no Kuni..." he answered softly. "However, that came to an end when our lord, Hiyami Touga - a good, kind man - was assassinated in the middle of the night."

"By ninja?" Naruto asked.

"Of course," Sasuke answered gruffly. "If he kept only swordsmen as his guard detail, all one would have to do would be to hire a couple of ninja to sneak in and take him out."

"Sasuke-kun!" Sakura gasped, surprised that the Uchiha would be so blunt. *HE'S RIGHT, OF
"He's right," Shuya replied, his expression tight. "A handful of ninja with the use of genjutsu or ninjutsu could easily subdue an entire squadron of guardsmen long enough to sneak in and do the job they were hired to do." He paused, his expression darkening even further. "But that's not how it happened..."

"They killed everyone..." Everyone turned to Sasuke once again. "Servicemen and civilians, armed and unarmed... young and old... women and children..." His eyes darkened as he gazed off into the distance. "Every single person in their path..." A sharp twinge at his neck caused him to tense slightly, but no one seemed to notice.

Shuya studied him several moments before nodding. "Yes..." he answered. "It was a slaughter..."

Beside him, Ran let out a whimper, clutching at the sleeve of his haori. He placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze of both reassurance and apology.

"I'm sorry..." Naruto said finally. "I'm sorry that that happened to you and your family... But you can't just label all ninja as bad just because of the actions of a few... That's wrong!"

"We've had more than one encounter with ninja," Shuya said crossly. "And I can assure you none of them have been good."

"And what about us?" she exclaimed. "We're trying to help you!

"Because you've been given orders to, no doubt."

Blue eyes widened and then narrowed within the span of a few short seconds. "I wasn't ordered to help Ran-chan when that big guy snatched her!" she snapped. "And I would have offered to help you regardless!"

"Big brother..." Ran whimpered; this time her brother ignored her.

"We Samurai are honor bound to serve one master, protect him and his issue at all costs," he went on. "But ninja... you serve anyone! Provided they pay the right price, of course." Meeting Naruto's gaze, he murmured softly. "Tell me, Uzumaki-san, have you ever been ordered to kill anyone?"

Sakura gasped in outrage. "We're genin! We'd never be given that kind of mission!"

"But you could be, given enough time." he persisted, all the anger he felt regarding their situation welling up inside of his chest. He kept his gaze on the blonde, whose expression was strangely blank. Under normal circumstances, he would have been a bit startled by it - the blonde had been a myriad of expressions and emotions since their initial encounter - but now it only served to make him even angrier. "And you still haven't answered my question."

"You have no right to ask that!" Sakura countered, stepping in front of Naruto in an almost protective gesture. "I understand that you're angry, but knock it off! You're upsetting your sister!"

Shuya blinked, whipping his head back to the little girl beside him. At the sight of the fat tears welling up in the corner of her eyes, his anger vanished as quickly as if someone had thrown a switch. "Ran-chan..."
"Big brother..." Ran sniffled again, a few stray tears trailing down her cherubic cheeks.

He'd gone too far... He stiffened, feeling a stab of guilt as an old memory rushed through his mind.

~ "Oh no, Shuya, you've made her cry...! Hush now... hush little Ran-chan... it's all right... Come, Shuya-chan, come and apologize for upsetting her!" ~

He remembered shuffling forward slowly, setting his bokken aside as he hesitantly accepted the small, fussy bundle. He'd been both nervous and anxious, listening carefully to all of his mother's instructions in order to make amends for his grievous error. Once settled, he stared down at the little infant in his arms, rocking her gently in attempts to soothe her cries. ~ "There, there, Ran-chan..." ~ he'd cooed. ~ "I didn't mean to upset you... can you forgive me...?" ~

The small babe's cries soon quieted and she opened her eyes to gaze at him with bright blue orbs. A few moments passed before the infant let out a little burbled laugh, fixing him with a toothless smile.

~ "See now? All better, ne?" ~ He remembered his mother's bright, happy smile as she ruffled his hair affectionately. ~ "I knew you could do it, Shuya-chan! It's your job to protect our Ran-chan, not make her cry, all right?" ~

~ "Right!" ~ he agreed, bobbing his head obediently before turning his attention back to the little bundle in his own small arms. A chubby baby hand reached out towards him and he met it with his own. ~ "I promise, Ran-chan," ~ he murmured, his expression as serious as a nine year old's could be. ~ "I won't ever make you cry again..." ~

"Ran-chan..." He knelt down before the younger girl, drawing out a handkerchief from his haori. He dabbed at her tears tenderly, his expression filled with contrition. "I'm sorry..." He turned his attention back to the pink-haired kunoichi still glaring at him, his expression saying what he couldn't yet bring himself to with words.

Sakura paused, her anger diminishing slightly at the repentant look on the other boy's face. 'He was reacting out of anger at the situation...' she told herself. 'Still...' She glanced over her shoulder at her fellow kunoichi, who by all appearances looked to be completely oblivious to the situation. She knew better, however. "It's getting late..." she murmured quietly. "Do you want to keep moving, or should we find a place to stop for the night?"

Shuya straightened and turned to face her, grateful for the diversion. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to stop for the night." he answered quietly. "You're getting pretty tired, right, Ran-chan?"

The young girl nodded, still sniffling fretfully as she clutched tightly at the hem of her brother's sleeve.

His expression tightening briefly, Shuya turned back again to Sakura with a slight nod. "Lead on then, Haruno-san."

The kunoichi blinked briefly at the prospect of being in charge - normally Sasuke took point in their stand-alone missions - but seeing as the Uchiha seemed to be ignoring them just as much as the blonde, Sakura figured there really wasn't much choice in the matter. "Okay," she sighed. "Let's go."

--

"Miss Ninja,"
Naruto felt the small, hesitant tug on her sleeve, turning her attention the little blue haired girl staring up at her. She gave her a small smile. "What's up, Ran-chan?"

"Are you a bad ninja?"

The blonde paused, glancing across the small campsite. Sakura had gone to the nearby river to acquire some fish for dinner while Sasuke had gone off to brood under the pretense of setting traps. On the other side of the site, Shuya sat with his back against a tree trunk with his eyes closed. Ran more than likely assumed he was sleeping, but Naruto knew better. Given his tense posture, it was obvious he was listening to every word being spoken. "I've been told that I am by some," she answered, grinning slightly. "But I think those people were referring to my skills, not my character..."

"Oh..." It was clear by her expression that the younger girl didn't quite understand. "But you're a good person... you don't do bad things, right?"

The blonde paused, considering. "Remember earlier, when you guys said you follow Bushido?"

The little girl bobbed her head up and down. "Well every ninja has a nindou, too... their own ninja way. Some of them are good, some of them are bad... A person can be a ninja and be a good person, but can be given a mission that is something bad..."

"And they hafta do it cuz it's an order?" Ran asked.

Naruto nodded. "Sometimes they don't have a choice... see, most ninja villages have a leader that they are all sworn to serve, called a Kage. That person's supposed to be the strongest in the village, and hafta make sure everyone's safe and protected. In order to do that, they give out missions to the ninja in order to keep the village going."

"Bad missions? Like the one that took our family?"

"Some villages do," Naruto answered. "But I've never heard of any of our ninja doing a mission like that." Not to say that it didn't happen; it was a ninja village after all. "Our village is a peaceful one; so's our Hokage." Most of the time, anyway. "I made sure of it."

"You picked out your Hokage?" Ran asked in astonishment, stumbling over the unfamiliar word just slightly.

"Well... I didn't pick her, but I made sure she understood how important her job was when I helped bring her back," Naruto answered. "Cuz, y'see, one day I'm gonna have her job and I wanna make sure our home's bein' taken care of 'til I'm ready."

"You're gonna be the leader someday?"

She nodded. "That's the goal I've had for myself ever since I was smaller than you are now," She tapped Ran lightly on the nose with a finger, earning a small giggle. "The Hokage is the greatest, strongest ninja in the whole village and it's their duty to protect everyone and keep them safe. That's what I'm gonna do 'cuz that's part of my nindo."

Ran looked up at her, her expression curious once again. "What's your nindo?"

Naruto met her gaze, her expression somber. "I will not hide, I will not run away',' she recited softly. "I will walk a path of no regrets'. That, Ran-chan, is my nindo... my Ninja way."

The small girl studied the blonde seriously for a few moments in silence before allowing a wide smile to spread across her face once more. "I knew it!" she exclaimed happily. She jumped
forward, throwing her arms around the blonde's neck in a tight hug. "I knew you were good! I just knew it!"

Startled but glad for the young girl's seal of approval, Naruto returned the hug, chuckling slightly. "Oh yeah?" she grinned. "How'd you know?"

Ran pulled back, fixing her with a knowing smile. "Cuz you've got eyes just like my bi brother's!" she exclaimed. "That's how!"

On the other side of the campsite, Shuya regarded the pair with a thoughtful frown before closing his eyes once more.

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It was the smell of smoke that woke him; roused out of his deep slumber, bleary blue eyes took in the shadowy silhouetted figures running back and forth past his shoji door. Curious but wary at the cause for such activity at so late an hour, he rose from his futon, quickly padding over to his closet. Withdrawing his practice sword - he'd recently graduated from the bokken to an actual blade (with dulled edges, mind you) - from its spot in his wardrobe, he quickly and quietly padded out of the room.

He'd expected a fire - the smell of burning tinder had told him as much - but he was totally unprepared for the chaos on display before him. Bodies lay everywhere across the courtyard - bodies of good, strong men... his kinsmen and clansmen - wounded and dying like animals. He didn't... he couldn't understand what he was seeing... Bright flames licked and ate away at the intricate craftsmanship of the surrounding buildings, years of painstakingly rendered artistry curling and crumbling away under searing a blistering heat.

He clutched his sword tightly in a white knuckled grip, trying vainly to keep his wits about him even as he could feel the bile rising in his throat. This was wrong... all of this was wrong! This wasn't supposed to happen!

A loud cry cut through the chaotic cacophony of sound, and he focused on it as a drowning man would the sight of the shore. He knew that voice; it was his father's! He had to get to him! And quickly!

'Father... father will know what to do...!' 

Tabi-covered feet brought quickly across the compound, his heart aching and pounding in his chest as he took in the sight of all those who had fallen in battle. 'No... this wasn't a battle... this was a slaughter! What is goin---?

Another cry sounded, this one of anguish, bringing him to a halt in front of a large silk-screen shoji. He tensed in unease as the red splatters staining the intricate depiction of a crane overlooking a koi pond. This... this was the master's chambers...

'But what is father doing here...?' A cold feeling settled at the base of his spine. Had something happened? Manners and decorum flew out the proverbial window as he gripped the shoji screen, pulling it open with a loud clatter. "Father!"

There he stood, his once proud father - a man he had looked to for strength, for guidance - kneeling on the floor battered and broken, his face twisted in pain, anguish, and despair. Before him lay their lord and master, face down in a pool of dark crimson.

"Father..." He staggered into the room, tears burning his eyes. This couldn't be real, it just
"What has happened...?!"

"He's dead..." his father murmured brokenly. "We failed him... we FAILED HIM!!"

Shuya's eyes snapped open, darting around wildly. There were no flames, no bloodstained floors or shoji screens, only the dark, quiet setting of their forest campsite. He sat halfway up slowly, spotting the unconscious forms of the others asleep in their makeshift beds. Beside him, Ran muttered in her sleep, curling into a tighter ball beneath her sleeping blanket. Sitting up in his own sleeping bag, he shrugged out of his haori and placed it over her, tucking the ends in underneath her.

"I didn't expect it to get so cold overnight..." He tensed, eyes snapping towards the orange-clad blonde as she reentered the campsite carrying a bundle of twigs. He was a little surprised; she hadn't spoken to him since their little altercation a few hours ago. Despite his silent apology directed towards her teammate, he still felt horribly guilty. Personal feelings aside, his behavior had been uncalled for; totally unbefitting for a member of the Miyamoto clan. His parents would have been ashamed of him.

Oblivious to his thoughts, the blonde placed the twigs in her hands over the now dead fire. Without words, she quickly set about the task of rekindling it without so much as a glance in his direction. He briefly suspected that she might be snubbing him until she spoke up again. "I suppose it's 'cuz we're not in Fire Country anymore."

He shrugged noncommittally. "It's nothing Ran and I aren't used to," Blue eyes met his before refocusing on their current task. Shuya watched her work, noting how the slim hands that had accepted his almost shyly on the dance floor were now bound in protective wrappings. The shiny blonde hair that had been pinned up in high, intricate chignon, accented with a delicate white flower, now hung loose and wild brushing occasionally against her shoulders. At first glance one might had expected that the girl he'd danced with at the wedding and the one before him now were two entirely different people, but Shuya knew better...

"We can trust her," ~ Ran had insisted. ~ "She's got eyes like yours!"

"Ridiculous..."

"It's rude to stare, y'know..."

Shuya blinked, finding those blue eyes focused on him now, a single blonde brow raised in a mixture of annoyance and curiosity. He glanced away, flushing slightly. "I... apologize..."

Naruto studied him, blue eyes assessing him. He wasn't referring to his staring at her and they both knew it. "It's all right, I guess," she said finally, shrugging her shoulders as she tossed a few pieces of kindling into the quietly crackling fire. "I... apologize..."

Shuya didn't know what to say to that. They fell into silence once more, the fire giving off a few crackling pops before he dared to speak again. "Thank you," he murmured. This time the blonde blinked in confusion. "For the fire..."

She shrugged. "You guys might be used to it, but it doesn't make sense to be cold if you can avoid it... Specially Ran-chan since she's so small."
The young swordsman glanced over at his younger sister, his expression softening just slightly. He then turned his attention back to the blonde, his dark eyes curious. "Why are you so nice to her?"

Naruto blinked. "To who? Ran-chan?" She cocked her head slightly, blinking once more. "Why wouldn't I be?"

The explanation was there, just on the edge of his tongue, but he kept silent.

The blonde seemed to know what he wanted to say, even without hearing it. "There's no reason for me not to be nice," she continued. "After all... she's just a kid... it's not right for her to have to suffer so many hardships..." She paused. "How old is she, anyhow?"

"Six." Shuya watched as something skirted across the girl's face before being smoothed away. "Have you any siblings, Uzumaki-san?"

"Nah," she answered, scratching her head absently. Sometimes the Konohamaru Corps felt like little siblings, but not quite. "So far as I know I'm an only child."

He blinked. "So far as you know...?"

"I'm an orphan," Naruto answered, poking absently at the fire. "I assume my folks died when I was a baby; I never knew'em."

She assumed? No one had bothered to tell her what became of them? The thought of the bright eyed jubilant girl experiencing such a hardship - had she been alone like they were...? Shuya frowned, gazing down at the ground. "I'm sorry..." he murmured. "It's difficult... being without your family..."

The blonde made a noncommittal sound in the back of her throat, keeping her gaze on the bright flames in front of her. It wasn't something she thought about too often; what was the use of dwelling on something that couldn't be changed? "S'not so bad..." she replied. "I'm not alone anymore... even if we aren't related by blood, I have people that are precious to me... They're my family now."

Shuya gazed at her, unsure of what to think. This strange girl was generous, courageous, compassionate... definitely reckless, but also selfless... He wanted to believe that it was an act - that she was attempting to deceive him just like a ninja would - but he was finding it increasingly hard to do so. It was just something about her, he supposed...

"Uzumaki-san,"

"Hm?"

"Why are you a ninja?"

Light blue eyes turned back towards him. "Why are you a samurai?"

He frowned at her, thinking she was attempting to dodge the question. Glancing at Ran's sleeping form briefly, he answered with, "Because I have something I want to protect."

Naruto remained still for several moments before allowing a small smile to spread across her face. "I guess you an' me aren't so different after all then, ne?" The young man blinked at her, but she did not clarify, choosing instead to let out a loud yawn. "Man, I'm turning in. You should probably get some more rest, too."
A brief memory of smoke and flames flashed through his mind and Shuya shook his head. "No... I'm fine." he answered quietly. "I'll stay up a little longer."

"All right then..." Naruto murmured, making her way over to her own sleeping bag. "But you should probably wake Sasuke in an hour or two anyway... he's supposed to take the last shift. Oh, careful when you wake him though - he kicks like a mule."

Like he was really going to attempt it now that she'd said that... "I'll remember that." Shuya turned his attention to the flames, his expression turning contemplative once more as he mulled his brief conversation with the blonde over in his head.

"Hey, Shuya?"

"Hm?" He turned towards the blonde, who was now lying down in her sleeping spot, only the top of her hair visible beneath her blanket. Several moments passed by but the blonde made no other comment. He frowned slightly. "Uzumaki-san?"

"I almost killed somebody once..." she murmured finally. The young swordsman froze. "I would have... but someone else did it at the last moment..."

Shuya stared at the blonde's back. "I see..."

"I didn't wanna do it actually..." The blonde shifted, letting out a sound that might have been a laugh but sounded more like a sigh; she didn't turn to face him. "But that person had attacked one of my teammates... had hurt them... really bad..."

"You were defending them?"

"I will always do what I can to protect those precious to me." the blonde answered. Shuya stilled once more; he'd never heard such a serious tone from the girl. Was this really the same person he'd danced with... what was it... three days ago? "I won't run. I won't hide. I will never go back on my nindou."

He stared at her in wonder. "Uzumaki-san... I..."

The blonde kunoichi sat up, meeting his gaze. "You know we're here to help you an' Ran-chan, right? We're not like whoever hurt you before."

His eyes widened slightly before he turned away once more, attributing the sudden warmth in his cheeks to the fire in front of him. Several moments went by before he decided to speak. "Yes... I think I know that..." he answered softly. "...Thank you..."

Naruto studied him a few moments in silence before letting a small smile spread across her face. 'Finally!' Giving a little nod, she retreated back into the warmth of her sleeping bag, leaving the young swordsman to her thoughts.

Little did she know, however, was that Shuya was not the only one with something to consider. Unnoticed by the other two, Sasuke turned away from the fire, dark eyes staring upwards into the sky as he tried to make sense of the thoughts running through his head.

She kept saying things that caught him off guard. Things that made him... made him think about things that he didn't want to be - didn't need to be thinking about.

~ "I'm not alone anymore... even if we aren't related by blood, I have people that are precious to me... They're my family now." ~
"You'll find nothin' is impossible when my family's in danger!"

He clenched his eyes shut, trying to shut those errant thoughts out of his mind. His neck gave a sharp twinge but he clamped his hand against it, doing his best to ignore it and the strange seal he knew resided there. It had been bothering him a bit the last few days, but he'd done his best to work through it. He couldn't afford to have it slowing him down after all.

An angry blonde's face with sharp blue eyes flashed in his mind's eye. "You idiot! You're no match from him like this, can't you see that?"

His neck twinged again and he bit back a groan.

It was going to be a very long night.
Chapter 36a: Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

Shuya divulges information about he and Ran's past

Chapter 36

Team 7 and the two orphaned samurai children set out early the next morning, with Shuya and Sakura taking point once more. Although no one made mention of the incident that occurred the night before, it was obvious to everyone that something had changed. While he still carried himself with the same stiff mannerisms as before, it was very clear that Shuya was a bit more at ease around his and Ran's young escorts.

Of course, that didn't mean he was any more forthcoming about their situation.

It still irked Naruto a little; because really, how was she supposed to help if she didn't know what was wrong? However, given the headway she'd seemed to make with the older boy the night before, she resolved not to force the issue. Until he decided to truly trust them, they'd all just have to follow Iwano-baasan's advice and keep all their senses open. After all, they weren't out of the woods... yet.

"We made it out of the forest!" Ran exclaimed happily. With an excited giggle, she trotted forward - Naruto's hand still secured tightly in her own - towards the break in the trees. "Let's go!"

"Slow down, Ran-chan," Shuya admonished lightly, but as she and the young girl passed, Naruto noticed a small smile on his face.

"Follow me, Sempai," Ran exclaimed to her companion. "It's this way,"

"What's this way?" Naruto blinked.

"Auntie's farmhouse!"
"Farmhouse?"

"Auntie?"

"An old friend of the Miyamoto family," Shuya answered, dark eyes falling on the old farm house that sat on the large hill that overlooked the forest from which they emerged. "Her husband was a merchant who used to trade within our province. When he retired they moved out to this old farm. Uncle has since passed on, so it's just Auntie here now."

"So your old home must not be far from here...?" Sakura asked, grimacing slightly at the pained expression that skirted across the boy's face.

"That's right."

"I don't understand..." the pink haired kunoichi's eyes darkened in confusion. "Why didn't you and Ran just stay with her? Why travel from place to place for 5 years when you obviously had some place to come back to?"

Shuya stopped, staring down at the ground. He glanced upwards briefly, his eyes falling on his young sister in the distance - the younger girl was currently hiking up the hem of her kimono in order to have more mobility running uphill. He grimaced slightly at this - not very ladylike at all...

"Shuya-san...?" Sakura was still waiting for an answer from him.

He shook his head, adjusting the strap of his pack as he began walking again. "I couldn't bring myself to burden her..."

The kunoichi blinked in confusion. "Huh...?" The boy didn't respond as he hurried to close the distance between him and his sister. "Shuya-san...!"

"Let it go, Sakura," Sasuke murmured, his dark gaze focused away from her.
She paused, gazing back at him. 'Sasuke-kun...?'

The dark haired boy said nothing, his thoughts seemingly focused on things Sakura could not begin to fathom. Like Shuya, his family had been massacred by a ninja. Did their situation remind Sasuke of his own she wondered? Of the family and friends he had lost? Or of the vow he had made for himself?

~ "...I can't really call it a dream... but I have an ambition. The resurrection of my clan and..." ~ She remembered the darkness that had been in his eyes, and the anger and bitterness in his tone all too clearly. ~ "...to kill a certain man." ~

She also remembered the early days of Team 7, when she'd received a sharp rebuke from the Uchiha for her remark about Naruto being an orphan. She'd been surprised then - was Sasuke actually defending Naruto? - but she quickly realized that her callous comment regarding the blonde's circumstances had only reminded him of his own.

Both Sasuke and Naruto were orphans. Both of them had been alone.

~ "I don't know what it's like... Even though I don't get to see them often... my parents are alive...I can't even relate..." ~

~ "We wouldn't want you to," ~

Sakura stared at the Uchiha's back as he slowly trudged after their companions. Shuya and Ran's situation had to remind him of his own past. She bit her lip, wishing there was something she could do or say to help him. She knew he wouldn't accept it, but despite that she still wanted to try!

'Sasuke-kun...' she murmured to herself. 'Why... why won't you let anyone in...?'

She had glimpses of what lay behind his emotional walls and barriers, brief moments where he'd lowered his guard and let her in. However, each time after he always seemed to recover and shut her out even more harshly than before. It hurt, and despite her feelings for him, Sakura always found herself wondering whether all the heartache and disappointment was worth it.

~ "We of Team 7 don't abandon our teammates." ~
She realized then that it wasn't just Sasuke that she had to protect, it was Naruto as well. The blonde had taken the chance and lowered her guard (and several of her masks - Sakura was not so foolish to think the hyperactive blonde had only one) to let her in and Sakura could tell that every day the blonde was thankful for it. When she called her 'Neechan', it was more than just a nickname for a teammate that kept her in line and out of trouble; to the blonde, Sakura really was her big sister. But Sasuke...? What was she to him...?

~ "I don't care about becoming a Chuunin," ~ She remembered his gaze had been so cold back then during the Chuunin exams. While he'd fixed Naruto with glares full of anger and loathing, he'd viewed her like one would an annoying obstruction in their path. ~ "I'm only here to fight strong opponents. So stay out of my way." ~

Did she mean anything to him? Anything at all...?

~ "...if you are willing to give up on what you want so easily... it must not have been something you truly wanted..." ~

"Oooooii, Neechan!" Roused out of her thoughts, Sakura looked up, pale green eyes falling on the orange blur waving at her from midway up the hill. "Hurry it up already!"

"Yeah, hurry it up!" Ran echoed with a wide grin. Shuya muttered something that might have been another reprimand, but was answered with a giggle.

Realizing quickly that she was lagging behind, the young kunoichi hurried her steps in order to catch up with the group. She managed to quickly cover a few yards, stopping in surprise at the sight of the blue covered shoulder that fell into her line of vision. 'Sasuke-kun...?!' She blinked at the Uchiha in surprise, but he began walking forward once more as if he hadn't been waiting for her to catch up.

~ "It doesn't matter. You're my teammate. I'm supposed to look after you." ~

Feeling a sliver of hope bloom in her chest, Sakura ducked her head down low to hide the small smile threatening to creep out across her face. 'I may not be strong...' she thought to herself, matching her stride to that of the silent boy beside her. 'But I'll do whatever I can to look after you,
Nishikado Nozomi, despite her small and visibly frail stature, was still a keen, sharp, and spry old woman. Though she looked to be pushing 60, she was a sturdy thing, well accustomed to maintaining all aspects of the old farmhouse that was her home. Keen brown eyes hidden behind thick, large spectacles had evaluated the three ninja accompanying Shuya and his sister - noting how the young girl was still holding onto Naruto's hand - before quickly ushering them all inside. In a very motherly-grandmotherly fashion, she quickly set about the task of getting everyone warm, fed, and comfortable before even allowing anyone to utter a single word regarding their business there.

"Nozomi-baachan's a tough old bird, ne?" Naruto muttered half-heartedly as she absently toweled her hair. Among ensuring that they were warm and comfortable, the old woman had insisted they all take a hot bath before dinner as well. It hadn't been negotiable.

Ran giggled from beneath her own fluffy towel. "Silly Sempai, Auntie's not a bird, she's a lady!"

Sakura elbowed the blonde lightly, earning a small grunt. "Nozomi-san was nice enough to put us up for the night," she admonished. There had only been one guest room, so the children had all agreed to share. Sakura remembered suggested that Shuya and Ran take the bed, but the older boy had insisted all three girls take it instead. 'So chivalrous... why can't all boys be like that?' "So try not to be rude."

"Okay, okay..." Naruto grumbled. Pausing briefly, she turned to Ran once again, sticking out her tongue playfully. The little girl giggled once more.

Shuya entered the room where they were sitting, giving his sister a once over. "Have you dried off yet, Ran-chan? I don't want you to catch a cold."

"Almost, Big Brother!"

Naruto grinned, pouncing towards the little girl to give her a towel noogie. She let out a loud squeal of laughter in response. "Don'cha worry, Ran-chan! I'll help ya!"
"Aaaaieee, Sempai!" Ran wiggled out of Naruto's grasp, bolting towards the door and out of the room. "You can't catch me, you can't catch me!"

"Oh yeah? I'll get you yet!"

"Waaaiiii!!"

Her brother watched them go, smiling softly as he walked further into the room. Nozomi wouldn't be pleased to catch them running through the halls, but he was certain they'd be fine. Right...? After a few minutes spent debating, Shuya set down his belongs and retreated back out of the room once more. Padding softly down the hall, he made his way into the kitchen. There he found Naruto and his sister at the counter, the small blonde carefully reading out the directions in a recipe book that Nozomi must have been nice enough to set out for them.

"Ran-chan wanted to make mocchi for everyone," Nozomi answered as she came up behind him. "Your kunoichi friend was kind enough to offer her assistance."

Shuya watched as Naruto carefully and patiently assisted the young girl in assembling all the ingredients necessary. She didn't hover, allowing Ran to carrying out the tasks she was able, stepping in only when necessary in order to prevent too much of a mess. "Ran really has taken a liking to her." he murmured.

"I noticed," Nozomi answered, keen bespectacled eyes studying him. "Ran-chan seems much happier."

"Yes..."

~ "I promise, Ran-chan, I won't ever make you cry again..." ~

"Shuya-kun...?"

"She's never gotten attached to anyone so quickly..." he exclaimed, running a hand through his hair. He was glad to see his little sister smiling and happy, instead of tearful and frightened, but... "It won't last..."
"Not many things do," the old woman sighed. "She's young, but in time she will come to understand. So long as she has you with her, everything will be fine."

In the kitchen, Ran let out a delighted giggle that sent a pang to his heart. Shuya's eyes darkened as he looked away. "That won't last either..."

The older woman frowned, grabbing his sleeve as she led him back further down the hall. He didn't protest. "Shuya," she began.

"We've had this conversation before, Auntie," he sighed, his whole being turning weary. "I must fulfill my duty as a member of the Miyamoto clan."

"Your duty is to protect Ran," Nozomi countered, her old face stern. "She needs you."

Shuya's thoughts briefly went back to the Iwano wedding, where a blonde in blue silk had been so quick to rescue and defend Ran from those ninja. So brave... so selfless... and towards someone she didn't even know! "Ran-chan is very well protected." he muttered.

A deceptively frail but strong hand rapped him lightly on the crown of his head in reprimand. He tensed in surprise; Auntie hadn't cuffed him in years! Not since he used to try to knick onigiri as she made them. "Ran is your responsibility; it is your duty to keep her safe, not ninja from Konoha." Nozomi straightened her spine, peering down at him severely through thick lenses that glinted in the dim light of the hallway. "Are you so ready to turn your back on her?"

~ "I knew you could do it, Shuya-chan! It's your job to protect our Ran-chan, not make her cry, all right?" ~

"I would never turn my back on her," Shuya responded. "I would do anything for her. Anything."

Nozomi studied him quietly for a few moments before relenting with a sigh. "Good," she answered. "Then go lie down and get some rest. You're no use to anyone if you're asleep on your feet."

He smiled halfheartedly. "Yes, Auntie."
"Don't 'Yes, Auntie' me," she grunted, tapping his head lightly once more. "Run along - or do I have to get kunoichi-san in there to escort you?"

"I'm going, I'm going..."

"Oh, Shuya-kun, wait a moment!" The old woman reached into her pocket and drew out a small envelope. Crossing the distance between them, she placed it in his hands, giving him a reassuringsqueeze.

The boy glanced down at it, his dark blue eyes widening in surprise at the small wax seal keeping it closed. "This is..."

"It arrived just a day or two ago." Nozomi answered. "I was concerned at first, but then you and Ran-chan arrived with those ninja..."

Shuya nodded lightly, staring at the envelope with an intense expression. They'd known to find him here? But how? Remembering that his and Ran's plight had attracted the attention of Konohagakure, he imagined the older ninja present in the group had been busy as well. He opened the envelope, quickly reading its contents before refolding it with a heavy sigh.

"Is everything all right?" Nozomi asked.

"Yes, Auntie," he murmured softly, giving the envelope look before glancing off down the hall once more. "Everything is just fine." Placing it back gently in Naomi’s hands, he fixed the old woman with a half smile before continuing on his way.

Nozomi watched him go, the smile fading from her face the moment his back was turned. 'Shuya...' she thought sadly, watching the boy trudge away, trying to maintain his stiff and proud posture despite his obvious exhaustion. So much had been placed on his shoulders at such a young age, and despite how much she wanted to help him, she could only do so much. He had decided on this mission on his own, taking the task upon himself because he had felt no one else could. She remembered that day so clearly...

Five years ago she had opened her door to a wet and bedraggled young boy carrying nothing but a sword, an infant, and the blood-spattered clothes on his back. Wide blue eyes had stared up into hers filled with fear, pain, anger, and exhaustion. Nozomi remembered being stunned; it was unnatural for eyes so young to be filled with such anguish. What in Kami's name had he seen? Her
bespectacled eyes had taken stock of the red staining not only his clothes, but the blankets swaddling the young infant he carried as well. What in Kami's name had he done?

~ "They're gone, Auntie..." ~ he had whispered softly, holding out the baby for her to take. She had accepted her without complaint; Ran fussed a little but soon quieted with a little gentle rocking. ~ "All of them... everyone... every one of them... gone..." ~

Nozomi had spent enough time around warriors to know when something terrible had occurred. Her husband was a merchant who traded with numerous villages - Hidden and civilian. There had been talk of a coup - had been for years... He'd informed the Miyamotos of everything he knew - they were responsible for Lord Hiyami's protection, after all - and precautions and safety measures had been taken. Where anything to occur, their old farm was to be a safe house...

It made her heart run cold to think Shuya had come here alone... Wasting no time she ushered the boy inside, quickly setting about the task of getting the two of them warm. She insisted that Shuya go and get cleaned up but he outright refused to let Ran out of his sight. Anytime the sleeping infant disappeared from his view he'd go into a panic that would take forever for Nozomi to soothe him out of.

~ 'What on earth happened...?' ~ she'd wondered to herself once the boy finally succumbed to exhaustion and fell asleep. For days he remained in an unconscious state, and more than once Nozomi had feared for his health. She did what she could for him and Ran in the meantime - it would do no good to call for a doctor. The nearest one had resided just outside the Hiyami estate, and just four days after his and Ran's arrival, Nozomi learned the awful truth...

An assassination attempt had been made against Lord Hiyami Touga by one of his court advisors. There hadn't been mention of which one; several of them had been away on diplomatic matters, but Nozomi was certain she knew exactly which one was responsible. Everyone knew the man had been after the lord's wealth and power and yet nothing had been done to put him in check... Of course, it was too late now; Hiyami Touga was dead, along with all the entire clan of samurai whose ancestral duty had been to protect those of his line...

Nozomi paused, remembering the sleeping boy, who despite his lax features, held onto his father's sword with a white knuckled grip. Like Ran, he refused to be parted with it. He'd come all the way here with both of them, pushing his young body to the brink in order to see them safe. It had been his mission; the only thing he'd had to keep himself going.

She'd sighed softly, brushing a few stray locks of hair out his young face. He stirred, whimpering at the contact as he tightened his hold on the sheathed blade. They weren't safe here, she knew, and suspected that on some level Shuya knew it as well. He may have been young still, but he was samurai. His father had taught him well. As soon as he was able, they would leave once more.
They would run, they would hide. They would keep hiding until it was safe to return.

It would be tough. It would be difficult, but Shuya would do it. The moment he appeared on her doorstep Nozomi knew that was the mission he had chosen for himself. It was up to him to keep Ran safe and so that is what he would do... until he could do it no longer...

'You've kept going for the sake of your mission,' she told herself, her thoughts on the young man who'd just left her to -hopefully- go and rest. She was glad that he'd found - and had been willing to accept - assistance in the form of Konoha ninja, but there was so much that they didn't know! She could tell just by looking at them; he hadn't told them anything!

Carefully unfolding the paper in her hands, she peered down at it to see the small, neatly written script spelling out three simple words...

'Six more days'

She sighed again as she refolded the letter, tucking it in the front pocket of her apron. Just six more days and his mission would finally be over...

But what then...?

"Auntie?"

Nozomi opened her eyes, peering down at the blue haired girl currently peering up at her in curiosity. "Ahh... something wrong, Ran-chan?"

The little girl shook her head. "I wanted to know if you could help me finish?"

Brown eyes blinked, scanning the kitchen for the blonde haired, orange clad kunoichi. She was nowhere in sight. "Where did your ninja friend go?" she asked.

"To check on her teammates," Ran answered. "And on big brother."
"I see," Nozomi responded. The little blonde was far more perceptive than she had originally given her credit. She wondered if Shuya realized that as well.

"Sempai's a good ninja," the young girl explained. "And a good person, I can tell."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Mm-hm! She's got eyes like big brother!"

That brought the old woman up short. 'Eyes like big brother'... Quite honestly, Nozomi thought the dark haired ninja of the group to be more fitting of that description. His eyes had been dark and deep, filled to the brim with an old pain that looked as if it had recently been brought back to the surface. Those eyes suggested that he knew what it like to hurt, to suffer, to feel betrayal...

But the blonde... she was much harder to read. The old woman knew they could all be trusted - she wouldn't have let them in otherwise - but that was due more to blonde's effect on Ran than anything else. The girl, this Uzumaki, made Ran happy... Ran being happy in turn made Shuya happy. It wouldn't last, just like he'd said, but not many things did. Time was fleeting; it was important to enjoy it. The blonde looked as though she understood that. Perhaps she could see to it that Shuya did, too. For so long that boy had been focused only on his task, his mission. What would happen when he no longer had that to rely on?

Six more days... after that his mission was over. Nozomi could not help but worry at the prospect.

'Without the mission...' Brown eyes behind thick glasses closed briefly in sadness and worry. 'What will you live for... Shuya-kun...?'

--

Once he reentered the room, Shuya padded silently over to a corner, grabbing his belongings from their spot by the door as he went. Sitting down by his pack, he set about the task of reorganizing its contents.
"How long do you plan on staying here?"

Shuya turned his attention to the dark haired boy seated in the window seat. Sasuke's dark gaze was focused outside the window; a slight frown evident on his face. "Just for a night or two," he answered him softly. "I don't want to burden Auntie for too long."

"So you're just going to keep running?" Sakura asked from her position on the bed, a scroll unfurled out in front of her. "What kind of life is that for you and Ran?"

He grimaced. "It isn't," he agreed. "But what choice do we have? Especially with those ninja still after us."

"You're hiding," All three youths looked up to see the blonde kunoichi standing in the doorway once more. At their questioning gazes, she shrugged a shoulder before replying, "Ran-chan's with Nozomi-baachan."

"What's it like outside?" Sakura asked.

"It's raining, but it's quiet," the blonde answered. "I've got three or four bunshin out patrolling. That, along with the jerk's traps oughta keep things safe for the night."

The young swordsman nodded, giving his sword a once over before setting it down once more. Glancing upward again, he frowned at the sight of light blue eyes still pinned on him; waiting for a response to her previous statement, no doubt. "I'm not hiding." he said with a frown.

"Yeah, you are." she countered. "You've spent the past five years running away, followed by missing nin hired to kill you, capture you, Kami only knows what! You have us here to protect you, but we don't know from who or why! You get mad at us ninja for deception, but you're still keeping us in the dark! How about you start giving us some answers?"

Stunned into silence by her long tirade, Shuya remained still, his jaw slack. What could he say?

~ "You know we're here to help you an' Ran-chan, right? We're not like whoever hurt you before." ~
"We won't run away," The blonde's blue eyes were bright, entreating as she spoke softly. "We won't give up. We'll do whatever it takes to help you, but you gotta tell us how..."

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Sakura giving an encouraging nod. Sasuke kept his own dark gaze focused out the window. He let out a heavy sigh; there was no point in turning back now. "Touga-sama has one surviving relative... a younger sister who was married off around 6 or 7 years ago... to the Lightning Daimyo's eldest son, I believe." he murmured softly. "I remember that she was also very kind... her name is Misao."

"So you're looking for her?" Sakura asked.

Shuya nodded. "As a Miyamoto, I have sworn to serve him and those of his issue. As his only surviving family member, naturally my service would go to her."

Naruto twitched; she supposed it made sense in a weird sort of way... 'But it sure does sound pretty Hyuuga-ish...'. Stalking into the room, she plopped down on the edge of the bed beside Sakura. "So when you find this Misao-lady... what then?" Shuya glanced over at her. "You go to work for her, or something?"

"Something like that..."

Her blue eyes narrowed. "Then what happens to Ran-chan?"

"Misao-dono will take care of her."

"But how do you know...?" Naruto insisted. As much as he looked after the younger girl, she really couldn't fathom him just foisting her off on a perfect stranger. It just didn't make any sense!

As if he could sense her concern, Shuya gave her a small smile. "Misao-dono is a good woman," he replied. "As the Daimyo's daughter-in-law, she would be able to provide Ran-chan more protection than I could on my own."

'Just Ran-chan...?" "That may be so, but you're her family!"
The young swordsman winced, staring down at the sword still gripped tightly in his hands. He closed his eyes, letting out a deep shuddering breath. "No, I'm not."

The room fell into silence.

Sakura gasped, her scroll slipping out of her hands to flutter harmlessly back onto the bed. "What...?"

Naruto merely blinked.

Shuya looked up again, a smile that looked more like a grimace making its way across his face. "Ran-chan is not my sister..." he said quietly. "She is really Touga-sama's only daughter... and the heir to the Hiyami fortune."

"I don't understand..." Sakura began.

"Six years ago, Lady Hiyami died during childbirth," the young swordsman explained. "Touga-sama had no desire to remarry, but he knew that his newborn daughter would be a target for anyone who had their eyes on his fortune."

"You mean he suspected treachery even then?" He nodded. Naruto frowned in confusion. "Then why not do something about it? Why just sit and wait for the wolves to close in on him?"

"I don't know," Shuya sighed. "I think that while he knew one of his advisors was attempting to betray him, he couldn't find it in his heart to truly accept it." He paused, staring down at his hands. "After all, these were the men that had served him for years - why would any of them want to do something like that?"

"For money," Sasuke murmured. "And power."

Sakura glanced over at him, her eyes dark with worry. 'Sasuke-kun...'

Naruto met his gaze in the window's reflection briefly before turning her attention back to Shuya once more.
"You're correct again, Uchiha-san," Shuya replied. "The land owned by Hiyami-sama was very valuable, but after his death it was absorbed back into the Daimyo's control. However, his surviving advisors objected the takeover, insisting that it be divided amongst them--"

"Wait a minute," Sakura interrupted. "You just said that Ran-chan is Lord Hiyami's heir. Why would his assets be split amongst his advisors when they should be going to her?"

"Because they don't know that she's alive," Shuya answered. "Or rather... they weren't supposed to..." The two kunoichi looked at him in confusion and he let out a heavy sigh before launching into an explanation. "Like I said earlier, Lady Hiyami died during childbirth... With no potential for additional heirs, Touga-sama knew that his newborn daughter would become a target for those conspiring against him. Desperate to keep her safe, he turned to one of the few people he knew he could trust... his head of Security, the leader of the Miyamoto clan..."

"Your father?" Naruto guessed.

Shuya nodded. "Touga-sama and my father had been friends since they were children; he knew that he and our family would do anything to protect him and his. A few hours after Lady Hiyami's death, Touga-sama came to us with his newborn daughter, entrusting her to us..."

--

He remembered Lord Hiyami standing in the middle of their sitting room, a small wrapped bundle held tightly in his arms. From his hiding spot outside the shoji screen door, young Shuya had been awed at the sight of their lord; he'd always encountered the man smiling and happy... was it possible for someone to look so sad...?

"Touga-sama..." his father murmured softly, dropping down on one knee before him. "Are you certain of this...?"

"I have never been more certain of anything in all my years, Kazuo, my friend..." the lord responded in kind. He too lowered himself to the floor, carefully holding out the bundle for the other man to take. As his father obliged, an expression passed over the lord's face that almost made Shuya sob out loud. "Please... I beg of you..."

"Touga-sama..." His mother shifted forward, taking the bundle from her husband's arms. It made a
slight fussing noise, but quickly quieted as his mother rocked it gently. "We will take care of her as if she were our own... She will be loved, and most importantly... she will be safe."

'She...?' Shuya blinked in confusion, pressing against the screen as he peered through the gap in the door. Was that Hiyami-sama's baby in there...? 'But I thought she died...?'

"That is all that matters to me," the lord murmured, bowing his head in gratitude. His parents bowed their heads lower in response. "I am certain that she will be well cared for..." He paused, glancing over his shoulder at the screen. "Especially with such a brave and noble swordsman watching over her..."

Shuya let out a startled squeak, then clapped a hand over his mouth in a last ditch attempt to conceal his presence.

It was in vain, of course. He heard his mother's stifled giggle and then his father's sigh, "Shuya... come in here please."

Flushing in embarrassment - at getting caught - he slowly pushed open the screen, stepping in and closing it behind him softly. Glancing at his stern faced father and smiling mother, he knelt down and bowed his head in apology. "Forgive me," he murmured.

"It's all right, Shuya-kun," Touga responded. "Please, sit with us. I have something I wish to ask you."

The young boy did as he was told, padding quietly across the floor to sit next to his mother. He stared curiously at the bundle in her arms until the Lord called his attention again. He jumped, executing another stiff bow. "Yes, Hiyami-sama?"

"Shuya-kun," he laughed softly, although it was still a rather painful sound. "You may call me Touga if you'd like..."

"Yes... Touga-sama..."

He smiled again. "You've come very far in your training," he remarked. "Your father says you are well on your way to becoming an excellent swordsman. I am certain that he and your mother are very proud of you."
The young boy glanced at each of his parents' faces before returning his attention forward once more. "Thank you, Touga-sama," he replied. "I am honored to be able to serve the Hiyami Clan."

Touga nodded. "And so you shall," he replied. "I have a mission--no, I have a request to ask of you... it is very important and I can trust no one else to carry out this task but you."

Shuya was very still, trying very hard to keep the surprise and awe from his expression. A mission? From the lord himself? "Yes, Touga-sama?"

The Lord nodded to his mother and she shifted forward, allowing him a clear view of the bundle in her arms. His dark blue eyes widened as they took in the sight of the pink-faced infant swaddled in blankets. "A baby..." he awed.

"Yes," said Touga. "And from this day forward she is to be your baby sister..." He smiled again at the wide eyed expression the boy fixed him with. "It is now your duty, Shuya, to protect her and keep her safe from anyone who would try to harm her. She is a Hiyami, my only heir..." He paused and another look of pain flashed across his face before he continued. "But now she is a Miyamoto... and your responsibility. Can you handle this task?"

The young boy stared at him in muted silence before nodding his head vigorously; his long ponytail bobbed back and forth with the movement. "Yes sir, Touga-sama!"

His father gave a brief nod, a small smile touching his face.

"Um..."

"Yes, Shuya-kun?"

"What is Hiyami-dono--err, I mean... baby sister's name?"

Touga's face saddened once more before he fixed it in a small smile. "Why don't you have the honor?" he asked.
"Me?" he squeaked.

"Go ahead, Shuya-kun," his mother smiled, rocking the infant back and forth. "What shall we call your little sister?"

The young boy paused, studying the small infant in front of him. A few minutes passed in silence before he finally answered with, "Ran."

"Ran?" his mother echoed. He nodded vigorously.

"Ran it is then," Touga murmured. "Miyamoto Ran."

His father nodded, resting a hand on the lord's shoulder to offer reassurance.

"Here, Shuya-kun," The young boy blinked as his mother held out the infant for him to see. Uncertain of what to do, he let out a little undignified yelp, falling backwards on his bottom. At the sudden movement, the little baby let out a loud wail.

"Oh no, Shuya, you've made her cry...!" His mother began rocking the infant gently back and forth once more. "Hush now... hush little Ran-chan... it's all right..."

Eager to make amends - he'd just been given the important task of protecting his new little sister after all - he carefully edged forward, peering down at the squalling little infant. After listening carefully to his mother's instructions on how to hold her, he cautiously took hold of her, cradling her close to his chest.

"There, there, Ran-chan..." he cooed softly, rocking her as he had seen his mother and other women in their clan do with their babies. "I didn't mean to upset you... can you forgive me...?"

The small babe's cries soon quieted and she opened her eyes to gaze at him with bright blue orbs. A few moments passed before the infant let out a little burbled sound, fixing him with a toothless smile - well, as close as a newborn could get to one anyway...

Shuya knew right then that he would do anything for her...
"See now? All better, ne?" His mother smiled brightly at him, ruffling his hair as she always did when she was proud of him. Hugs were not acceptable for brave, strong swordsmen like him - he'd told her so. She'd merely laughed, of course. "I knew you could do it, Shuya-chan! It's your job to protect our Ran-chan, not make her cry, all right?"

"Right!" he agreed, bobbing his head obediently before turning his attention back to the little bundle in his own small arms. A chubby baby hand reached out towards him and he met it with his own. "I promise, Ran-chan," ~ he murmured, his expression as serious as a nine year old's could be. "I won't ever make you cry again..."

Giving the two of them a small smile and a nod, Lord Touga excused himself and quietly exited the room.

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"...he was dead a little under a year later."

The three genin from Konoha stared at the young swordsman, a myriad of emotions splayed across their faces. With his tale finished, the room fell into a tense, uncomfortable silence for several minutes before Sakura dared to break it.

"Does Ran-chan know...?" she asked. "About any of this...?"

"No," Shuya answered. "Touga-sama asked that we keep the truth from her... in order to protect her." He gazed down at his sword propped across his lap once more. "The less she knew, the safe she'd be..."

"So who was it?" Naruto asked suddenly. "The one that ordered the hit on your master? You said it was one of his advisors...?"

"I can only assume so," the boy answered. "More than likely it was his chief advisor, Bouma... He and Touga-sama argued all the time over financial things... My father wanted to put him under surveillance, but by the time he'd convinced Touga-sama to allow it..."
"It was already too late," Sasuke finished. Shuya nodded.

The blonde stared at him for a few moments. "You're not planning on going after him, are you?"

"Who? Bouma?" Shuya frowned. "No, not at all."

Both she and Sakura blinked in surprise. "But he more than likely betrayed Lord Hiyami... he had hired ninja to assassinate your entire family..." Sakura's green eyes darkened in confusion. "Not that I'm condoning it but shouldn't you be angry at the man who caused the death of your mother and father...?"

"He didn't..." Shuya replied. At their confused expressions, he elaborated. "The ninja he hired did kill my mother and family, but my father died at someone else's hand."

"Whose?"

Dark blue eyes met sky blue and Naruto almost reared back at the emotion swirling in those depths. Anger, despair, shame... they all crashed and collided with each other, leaving Shuya's eyes a deep blue storm of anguish. "Who killed your father, Shuya...?"

His hands tightened around his sword hilt, his knuckles turning bone white. "Isn't it obvious?" He laughed humorlessly. "I did."

~ End Chapter 36a
Chapter 36b: Honor

Chapter Summary

Truth leads to tragedy, and then more trouble...

Chapter 36b

Touga had been a fool. Traditionalist, idealist, weak; his position as a feudal lord had awarded him so much potential, so many possibilities... and yet the man had all but squandered them. Somewhere he'd come across the notion that a feudal lord's duty was to serve the people.

'Pah, what drivel!' Setting his sake down upon the table, Bouma grimaced in distaste as he recalled memories of the man he had served under for over 15 years. It was almost a shame really. The previous Lord Hiyami had been a little idealistic as well, but he'd been a doddering old fool, far more concerned with puttering around his estate, leaving its maintenance to his advisors. It had been assumed that once he'd died, things would continue to run as usual, but no...

Touga had to be different. Pandering around with the commoners had given the boy foolish notions that nobility should have no concern for. He had even gone so far as to instate a Miyamoto as his Chief of Security! Yes, the clan had served the Hiyami family for years as their personal guard, but for the most part Bouma had had no use for them. Well... that wasn't entirely true... the young Miyamoto women had proven to be useful to him from time to time; that lovely dark hair, that soft pale skin...

Of course, Miyamoto Kazuo had put a stop to that. Impetuous pup; despite his best attempts that foolish samurai had held Touga's ear for years. Filling his head with ideas of honor, selflessness... So concerned about upholding tradition - honesty, loyalty, and worst of all -- frugality! Bouma had no use such useless ideas and had tried for years to convince the young lord to see sense.

Kaminari no Kuni was a small country - a tiny protectorate of the larger Rai no Kuni that the Daimyo had graciously allowed to function independently as its own state. It was important that they do what they could to maintain their own wealth and interests, but it eventually became clear to Bouma that matters had to be taken into his own hands if they were to continue to maintain their way of life. Touga was so caught up in his antiquated feudal fantasy that he could not see that the way of the samurai had long since come to an end. There were profits to be gained, business ventures to be exploited, and Bouma was determined to see to it that he got his share... along with that of the Hiyami fortune as well.

Getting rid of Touga had been ridiculously easy. What use was a whole platoon of samurai against finely trained mercenary ninja? Of course, assassinating the entire Miyamoto clan had not been necessary, but they had long suspected him of foul play. He couldn't have any fingers pointing back to him, accusing him of treachery, could he? With them out of the way, there would be nothing to keep him from realizing his goals...

Except for the matter of Touga's missing heir...
Bouma cursed in frustration at the thought of some little brat standing in the way of what was rightfully his. He'd worked hard to earn that fortune! He deserved it, not some little urchin raised by commonfolk.

'Hmm... no matter...' A smirk crossed his face at the thought of the three ninja he'd hired to handle the problem. Their leader, Satoru, had served him well the first time around, and although he seemed to certain be taking his time, he had no doubt he'd succeed once again. After all... three highly trained rogue ninja against a orphaned teenage brat with a sword... how could they possibly lose?

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He'd left Bouma's estate under cover of darkness, quickly taking to the trees with a quickness of unease unseen in your average, run-of-the-mill page/servant boy. Bouma didn't know, or rather was too short-sighted to know, that his young assistant was actually a ninja, placed in his employ by the Daimyo himself. It had long been suspected that Bouma was involved with dealings of the disreputable sort, and while normally that wouldn't have caused much concern, his actions had earned the upset and displeasure of his esteemed daughter-in-law.

You did not upset the Lightning Daimyo's daughter-in-law. Bouma would learn that soon enough.

After a few hours of chakra-enabled sprinting, the young page/ninja reached his destination; a cavalcade of carriages lay nestled within a large copse of trees with several dozen guards - all ninja - set up around the area. As he touched down at the edge of the clearing, a sudden spike of chakra appeared to his left in the form of an older ninja bearing a head-guard with the kanji for oil. An intruder... in his Lady's camp....? Immediately his hand went for his weapons pouch.

"It's all right, Jiraiya-sama," a voice called, a Jounin captain situated further within the encampment by the looks of it. "He's one of ours."

The page blinked, taking a better look at the ninja beside him. His eyes widened slightly in surprise. One of the Sannin? Here?

"Okubo-san," the Captain called out. "You have news?"

The page nodded, giving a brief bow. "A missive I was given by Bouma. I would like to give it to Lady Misao at once."

"Okubo-san!" The three ninja turned at the sound of the soft voice calling to them. Approaching from one of the carriages was a young woman dressed in dark, umber-colored robes. Her hair was the color of ravens feathers, pulled up in a high-pony tail with a jade comb holding it in place. She regarded the three ninja with hazel eyes behind thin, delicate gold frames. "I hear you have news."

The young page bowed low, presenting the missive Bouma had given him. "My Lady," he intoned. "This is a message given to me by Bouma. Contained within are instructions he wished relayed to the Joukuu-Koudo-Umi."

She frowned delicately. "Joukuu-Koudo-Umi...?" she murmured. "I understand these are the missing-nin he hired..."

"Yes, my Lady." the page answered.
She nodded, turning to the white-haired Sage. "And you were able to find out information about this group, Jiraiya-sama?" she asked.

The Frog Sage nodded as well, recounting the information he had received from his contacts within the area. It had been difficult with such short notice, but he'd managed it somehow. "Joukuu-Koudo-Umi... Sky, Earth, and Sea..." He frowned slightly. "We're dealing with three nuke-nin from three different villages, Cloud, Rock, and Mist... working together as a team."

"I imagine that's very uncommon," Misao observed.

"Very," the sage agreed. "None of my contacts were able to discern the reason why, but I imagine its for convenience more than anything else." 'After all, it's not the first group of missing-nin to band together towards a common goal...' His mind went briefly to the blonde, knowing that she was out there somewhere in the wilderness with only her teammates to back her up. What if the Akatsuki decided to take another crack at snatching her tenant? None of them would stand a chance. "At any rate, they're lead by the Kumo nin, who goes by the name of Satoru..."

"Satoru," Okubo murmured, his passive features shifting into a scowl. "I have been tracking him for some time..."

Jiraiya's eyes widened just slightly. "You're an hunter-nin?" he asked. His features were undeniably plain; dark brown hair framed a pale face with brown eyes. It was no wonder Bouma hadn't given him much thought; looks like his were a dime a dozen! Still... a hunter-nin? The kid didn't look any older than fifteen!

"Okubo-san is one of the ninja who answer directly to our lord Daimyo," Misao answered. "My honorable father-in-law was kind enough to lend us his services for this endeavor."

Okubo bowed once again. "It is an honor, my Lady." Rising once more, he turned their attention back to the matter at hand. "Bouma hired Satoru to track down and kill your niece several years ago when he learned of her survival in the Miyamoto massacre."

A flash of pain skirted across the noblewoman's face. Like her elder brother Touga, she too had been close to the Miyamoto clan. She had been upset to learn of her betrothal to the Lightning Daimyo's son, knowing it would take her away from the people she had called family. Of course she had come to love her husband - he was austere like his father, but very loving and gentle towards those he cared for - but she had been devastated when she learned of the tragedy that had befallen her family in loved ones in Kaminari. By nature Misao was a very kind and gentle creature, but once learning the truth behind the travesty - that her brother's trusted advisor was more than likely responsible for it - her heart had cried out for vengeance.

Her husband and father-in-law had vowed to help her get it. Of course, they couldn't just outright accuse Bouma; they needed evidence. Thus a plan was set into motion. At her request, the Daimyo had assumed control of all of Touga's holdings, claiming that as there were no heirs with which to pass his wealth onto, naturally the estate would be absorbed by the government. Bouma had protested, of course, claiming that the holdings should be divided up amongst Touga's remaining advisors; as compensation for their many loyal years of service.

The wicked, hateful, disgusting excuse for a man!

Her father-in-law had pretended to see valid reasoning to his claim, deciding that a hearing would take place in order to determine the proper action to take. He had decided that Touga's estate
would go to Bouma and the other advisors only if it could be proven within five years time that no other person with a potential claim could present themself. Misao herself could not, unfortunately. She had given up the Hiyami name upon her marriage to her husband; there was only one person who could present a threat to Bouma's goals...

She only hoped she was still alive...

Touga had informed her of his plan to protect his daughter, and while she mourned for her brother's loss - of both his wife and child - Misao was glad to know that little Ran was being kept safe within the loving care of Kazuo's family. Shuya was such a sweet boy; so eager to do his duty as a member of the Miyamoto clan, and yet it was clear that he really did love Ran as if she were his sister. After the tragedy, she'd been so worried for them both, but a search to bring them back to the capital had proven futile.

Her only proof that they were still alive came in the form of correspondence with an old friend of the Miyamoto family, Nishikado Nozomi. She had kept correspondence older woman over the years, the dear old woman keeping her informed of Shuya and Ran's wellbeing and general whereabouts. Although her letters always assured her of the two's continued safety, Misao could not help but worry. As a Miyamoto Samurai, Misao was certain that Shuya would do all he could to keep her beloved niece from harm, but who would protect him?

"Don't worry, Misao-sama," Jiraiya replied, catching the younger woman's expression. "I'm sure your niece is fine. She's got that samurai boy protecting her, and he's got my student and her team protecting him."

A student of the famed Toad Sage... Misao felt a bit of her worry slowly melting away. "I cannot thank you enough for your assistance in this matter, Jiraiya-sama," she said, gratitude pervading her tone. "I will be certain to inform our Daimyo of Konoha's assistance; he will be certain to send his thanks to your lord Daimyo and lady Hokage as well."

The old ninja gave her a gallant bow. "I thank you, my Lady."

She nodded, turning her attention back to the young hunter-nin. "Okubo-san,"

He snapped to attention. "Your orders, my Lady?"

"Please do as Bouma instructed and deliver this notice to the Joukuu-Koudo-Umi. They cannot be made aware that anything is amiss."

Okubo nodded. "And your niece and her guardian?"

"Jiraiya-sama assures me they are safe with the team from Konoha," she answered, although it was clear by the look in her hazel eyes that she was still concerned as well. "In five days time we will all rendezvous in Takayama and then continue on back to the capital where Ran will be presented as my brother's rightful heir, and Shuya will provide testament for Bouma's crimes."

Okubo gave another short bow before disappearing from sight.

Nodding her thanks to the two remaining ninja present, Misao turned and headed back towards the caravan serving as her private quarters. She would have to thank her husband and father-in-law for all that they had done for her. 'Finally,' she thought to herself, a tremulous pain-filled smile spreading across her face. 'Finally Bouma will be made to pay for what he has done... Onii-
"There we are!" Nozomi exclaimed, putting the finishing touches on the plate of mocchi. "All finished!"

"We did it!" Ran cheered. "We did it!"

The old woman nodded, nudging the finished tray towards the young girl, giving her cheeks a gentle pat. "Why don't you go take that to your brother and your friends and go enjoy."

The little girl nodded with a grin, taking the plate in a careful grip before making her way out the room.

Nozomi watched her go with a smile before setting about the task of cleaning up. She worked briskly and efficiently, quickly returning the kitchen to its prior neat state. She was about to retire to her own room when she noticed the sliding door leading out to the porch was wide open, allowing rain to collect on the mat.

'Strange...' she muttered, crossing the room to close it. 'I know I didn't have that open before...'

She took a few steps out onto the patio, peering out at her garden. With the darkness and the rain, the glint of metal hurtling her way went unseen until it was too late.

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Back in the small guest room of Nishikado Nozomi's home, the three genin of Team 7 stared at the young samurai under their protection, almost identical expressions of shock evident on their faces.

Sakura was the first to speak, her voice small and hesitant. "You...what...?" Shuya didn't respond. He stared down at this lap, his hands tightening almost painfully around the hilt of his sword. "Shuya-kun...?"

In a flash of movement, Naruto was face to face with the boy, her blue eyes flashing. "What are you talking about?" she demanded. "What the hell are you talking about!"

Dull blue eyes met hers. "I am the one who killed my father," he murmured tonelessly. "With this very sword..."

She stared at him, her expression a mixture of horror and revulsion. "Why?!"

"I told you before that it was our sworn duty as members of the Miyamoto Clan to protect those of the noble Hiyami family," he answered. "We failed in that duty, shaming ourselves and all those who came before us. Because of that, it was the responsibility of those that survived the massacre to carry out what's known as Oibara."

"Oibara?"

His eyes darkened. "Seppuku."
Ritualistic suicide? Someone let out a sharp gasp; it was more than likely Sakura. Naruto was still staring at him, her face ashen and pale.

"But your father...?"

"My father was the leader of our clan," he went on. "The brunt of the shame fell to him. In order to uphold the tradition of Bushido and to atone for our failure, he had to forfeit his life."

"But I don't understand..." Sakura exclaimed. "Did he refuse...?"

"Of course not!" Shuya exclaimed, a little heat returning to his voice. "As part of the ritual, the one committing Seppuku must stab himself with his tanto, making a horizontal cut," He brought his hand to his abdomen, pantomiming the action. Sakura grimaced. "He has to have an attendant, the Kaishakunin, with him who will complete the ritual with Dakikubi..." He paused, his eyes flashing with pain. "Decapitation."

The room fell into silence for several long, tense moments.

"This Kaishakunin," It was Sasuke who spoke this time. The others turned to him surprise. "That was you."

Shuya nodded. "The Kaishakunin is supposed to be someone the dishonored one trusts..." he explained quietly. "And there was no one else..."

"How old were you...?" Sakura asked hesitantly.

"Nine." Shuya answered softly.

"Nine years old?" Naru exclaimed, aghast. "That's ridiculous!"

"That was my duty!" Shuya exclaimed. "It was the only way for our family to reclaim our honor. And yet... I failed..."

"You failed...?"

He stared at the sword that had once belonged to his father, the one that was to be passed onto him once his training had been completed. He hadn't been able to let go of it once the deed was done; Nozomi had had to pry it from his stiff hands after a fit of hysteria. His eyes filled with pain and shame. "I was supposed to follow after my father...after he died... but I couldn't... I was scared."

~ "...Scared... I'm scared..." ~ Sasuke tensed slightly, clenching his left hand just slightly. No one else seemed to notice.

"I remember desperately trying to search for someone... anyone that could make sense of what had just happened...but I couldn't find a single person." Shuya's dark blue eyes were dull with pain of memories best left buried. "I saw my mother... laying on the floor of the nursery..." He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the memory. "I had my father's sword in hand, ready to finally take my own life when I heard a small cry..."

"Ran-chan...?" Sakura guessed.

He nodded again. "My mother had hidden her underneath a hamper basket in the closet." he
explained. "She'd slept through the whole thing..." He paused, staring at his father's sword before glancing up at the others once more. "I knew then that I couldn't die... I had to protect Ran just like I'd told Touga-sama I would. I took her and left, hiding out here with Auntie for a bit before I could figure out what to do."

"And that is...?"

"Bouma is trying to gain control over Touga-sama's estate," he answered. "He can only do that if there is no one who can contest his claim - namely Ran. In five days time a hearing will be held within the capital where Ran-chan must be presented as Touga-sama's sole, living heir. Once that is proven, Misao-dono will publicly accuse Bouma for Touma-sama's death. It is my duty to testify to what occurred that day, as one of the only sole survivors."

"And after that...?" Shuya blinked slowly. Sakura frowned. "What will happen then?"

"Ran will be safe, her title as a Hiyami reinstated, and I..." He paused, his expression turning resolute. "I will finally do what I should have done five years ago."

The silence that followed his declaration was deafening, however it was quickly shattered by the sound of Naru's fist impacting with his chin. He toppled backwards with a loud thud, remaining in place even as the smaller blonde stood over him with her fists clenched angrily at her sides.

"Naruto!" Sakura exclaimed.

Her teammate ignored her. "Y'know, you almost had me sold on this Bushido crap of yours," she growled. "But that is most ridiculous bullshit I've ever heard!" She knelt down beside him, fisting a hand in his gi to yank him up towards her harshly. "You're a freakin' coward! How dare you turn your back on Ran like that!"

Shuya scowled; what did she know? She wasn't Samurai, she was just a ninja! He opened his mouth to object only to pause, frowning... Ran... how long had it been since he'd checked on her? "Ran..." He yanked his clothing out of the blonde's grip, rising up fully. "Where is she?"

Naruto blinked at him. "I left her with Nozomi..." She blinked again as Shuya suddenly scrambled to his feet. "Shuya...?"

The older boy stumbled towards the door, sticking his head out into the empty hallway. "Ran-chan...?" he called out. Stepping outwards, he paused as his foot brushed against something. Glancing down, he spotted a broken plate holding what looked to be a sticky, oddly shaped rice ball. His blood turned to ice in his veins. "RAN!"

The three genin were by his side in an instant. "What's happened?" Sakura asked worriedly, her pale green eyes darting around the empty corridor. "Where's Ran-chan? And Nozomi-san?"

Shuya didn't answer, choosing instead to dash down the hall towards the kitchen. His hopes of finding his surrogate sister there, making mocchi with Nozomi, were dashed when the kitchen proved to be empty. "Ran-chan? Auntie?!!"

"Shit!" All heads turned to the blonde as she darted across the room, rushing towards the shoji that lead outside to Nozomi's small garden. Following quickly after her, the others soon found what had caused her to react.
"Auntie!!" Shuya rushed towards the old woman sprawled out across the patio, collecting her up into his arms. "Nozomi... wake up! Please wake up!"

After a few calls the old woman slowly came around, opening pale brown eyes to met his. "Shu...ya..." she rasped out.

"Auntie..." Shuya's face twisted with pain and worry. "What happened...?" His eyes widened at the brief flash of metal near her arm, spotting the three needle-like objects protruding there. "Wha...?"

"Don't touch those!" Sakura exclaimed, yanking his hand away. "Those are Senbon... they're probably poisoned..."

"Poisoned...?!" he gazed down at the old woman in his arms, his expression turning frantic. "Who did this to you, Auntie?! Where is Ran?!"

The old woman slowly lifted a hand, pointing out beyond the garden into the darkness. "She ran off..." she whispered with difficulty. "I tried to stop her... she was... so upset... crying..."

Shuya paused, his mind going back to the plate of mocchi outside the door. She'd overheard them and run off? Guilt and fear warred for supremacy within his gut, leaving him sick and uneasy. 'Ran... how could you do something so foolish...?'

"Find her..." Nozomi said suddenly, grasping Shuya's hand as tightly as she could manage. "Those ninja... they came... they want to take her... You have to protec..." Suddenly her hand went limp, her hazy eyes rolling back and falling shut.

"NOZOMI!" Shuya cried out.

Sakura knelt down beside them, placing two fingers hesitantly against her neck. After a few seconds she hook her head, lowering it in remorse. Shuya felt his heart breaking all over again.

"Nozomi-baachan..." Naruto murmured brokenly. She turned her gaze to the boy kneeling beside her, her eyes turning glassy. "Shuya... I'm... I'm so sorry..."

He didn't respond.

"We have to go," Sasuke said finally, a deep scowl etched across his face. "Sakura, Naruto."

"I don't understand..." Naruto exclaimed, her face twisted in anguish as she dropped to her knees beside the young samurai. Her blue eyes gazed at the ashen faced figure in the young samurai's arms; a pale imitation of the bold woman who'd taken them into her home... "How did this happen...?" How had they gotten through?

"They avoided your Bunshin and my traps," the Uchiha said brusquely. "Now get up. We've got a job to do."

"Sasuke-kun!" Sakura admonished, halting only when she saw him regarding Shuya cradling Nozomi's body with something akin to... sympathy...? 'He's been in his place, before...' she reminded herself, her eyes darkening in pain for him as well. 'Sasuke-kun...'

"Naruto," The blonde snapped her head towards her male teammate, her blue eyes dull with sadness. "We don't have a lot of time. Can you track Ran's scent...?"
She grimaced. "The rain's still going pretty strong out there... that's the only way I can figure they got past--"

"I don't care about that," Sasuke interrupted. "Can you do it?"

She paused for a few seconds before nodding resolutely. "I won't let anything happen to Ran-chan." Out of the corner of her eye, Shuya tensed. She turned back towards him. "I'll do whatever it takes to protect her, Shuya."

~ "You know we're here to help you an' Ran-chan, right? ~

~ "I will never go back on my nindou." ~

~ "Ran is your responsibility; it is *your* duty to keep her safe, not ninja from Konoha." ~ He remembered Nozomi straightening her spine, peering down at him severely through thick lenses that glinted in the dim light of the hallway. ~ "Are you so ready to turn your back on her?" ~

"So will I..." he murmured quietly. The young samurai lifted his head, fixing her a resolute gaze. "I'm coming with you."

Sakura frowned slightly. "But... Nozomi..."

"KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!" Two blonde Shadow clones appeared beside the kneeling samurai, turning to the original to await orders. "Please take Nozomi-baachan and place her somewhere safe," she instructed. The two nodded, gently lifting the old woman up out of Shuya's arms. "Once you've done that, spread out and look for Ran-chan. Once you find her, do whatever it takes to keep her safe 'til we can get to you. Understood?"

The two clones nodded and then vanished back into the house with Nozomi in tow.

Once they were gone, everyone turned their attention to the dark haired Uchiha. It seems he was taking on the role of leader now. "All right then," he murmured. "Let's move out!"

--

Ran staggered blindly through the forest, her tears obscured by the cold rain, stopping only when an upturned root appeared in her path. She toppled forward with a loud yelp, collapsing in a muddy heap at the base of an old tree. Rather than get up and continue running - where was she to go anyhow? - she curled up on her side, sobbing her little heart out.

She finished the mocchi with Nozomi's assistance, preparing to bring them back to the room to share with her brother and the others. Before she could make her presence known however, she'd heard them arguing amongst themselves. She hadn't understood much of what had been said - precocious though she might have been, she was still only 5 years old - but one statement had stood out in her mind...

Her big brother was going to leave her.

It didn't matter how or why, but her brother - the only family she had - was going to leave her and never come back.
'But he promised!' she told herself.  'He promised we'd always be together!  Always!'  She didn't understand it.  Why would he leave her?  Had she done something wrong?  She didn't want him to go - why would he lie to her like that?

A chuckle could be heard over the loud pitter patter of rain, drawing the distraught girl's attention to a figure with copper colored hair strolling casually out of the shadows of the forest.  Taking in his features, most specifically the jagged scar running across his face, Ran knew immediately that he was a ninja.

"Wow, kid..." he murmured casually, a lazy grin spreading across his face.  "You're making this way too easy..."

"Go away," she murmured, rising to her feet slowly.  "Leave me alone."

"Can't do that," he replied, smirking.  "I've got a job to do, y'see... one that's taken me 5 years to finish..."

Ran slowly began backing away, blue eyes searching frantically around for anyone that might help her.  Wouldn't her big brother come for her?  Did he really not want her anymore...?

"I gotta give that other kid credit though, keeping you hidden all those years." He paused, smirking lightly.  "Sucks that he failed so close to the end..." He paused, reaching into the weapons pouch to pull out a wicked looking kunai.  He gave it a practiced twirl between his fingers before brandishing it towards the girl menacingly.  "Ah well..."

He lunged towards her with the blade held high, his smirk widening as she let out a wail of fear.  Just as he was about to close in for the kill, a flash of metal flew towards him, forcing him to jump back away from his target in order to avoid being struck.  He touched down in the soft mud several feet away, watching several shuriken thud into the tree bark around the same place his head had been.

A drenched figure in orange dropped down from the trees, brandishing several more kunai.  "Get away from Ran-chan!"

Three more figures appeared, two boys - one of them his target's guardian - and a girl equally soaked by the heavy downpour, armed with weapons of their own.  "Huh..." he muttered.

"You.." Shuya growled, clutching his sword hilt tightly as he stared down the ninja standing menacingly before his sister.  "You are the one that's been pursuing us...?"

Satoru smirked.  "Funny... I was just tellin' the little one how surprisingly difficult you've made this mission of ours..."

"Ours...?"

The genin of Team 7 tensed, all eyes going to the Mist and Iwa ninja that suddenly appeared on opposite ends of the clearing.  "You again?" Naruto snarled.

A malicious smirk spread across Yoko's face as she regarded the little blonde.  "Awww, what's wrong...?" she cooed softly.  "Didn't you miss me... Precious?!" With lightning quick moves, her long-sleeve covered arms lashed outwards, whips of water arcing out at the young group with deadly accuracy.
"Katon: HOUSENKA NO JUTSU!"

Several fireballs flew towards her in rapid succession, reducing her whips into a harmless tendril of steam before it could make contact with its intended target. The Mist ninja let out a hiss of frustration, turning towards the jutsu's caster with a look mixed with anger and shock. *He's still able to use fire jutsu with all this rain...?* she asked herself, narrowing her visible eye as she stared down the dark haired boy in this distance. *Just who are these brats?* Letting out another growl, she raised her hands, running through another series of hand signs. *Don't get in my way!*

The blonde cast a quick glare at the Mist Kunoichi before turning her attention back to her dark haired teammate. *"Jerk...?"

He snorted, already running through hand-signs of his own. *"Hn... you're in the way, Moron."*

A wild smirk passed across her face. *"That's all ya gotta say!"* Crouching down, she leapt away with quick burst of speed, leaving the Uchiha a clear view of his target.

"HOUSENKA NO JUTSU!!"

Yoko sneered. *"The same trick again!"* She raised her own hands, flying through a series of signs in order to conjure water to extinguish the fireballs hurtling towards her. However, she was surprised to find that although she was able to douse the flames, there was no stopping the red hot shuriken still hurtling towards her. *"Shit!"

Kaji bit his lip as his teammate dodged the volley at the last moment, his brow creased in frustration. *'Damn it, that punk again...'* He let out a growl, remembering how easily he'd been defeated by the younger nin during their first encounter. It was as if he'd been able to read his moves... Turning his attention back to the present, he eyed the pink-haired genin eyeing him warily. *'So this is the one I get stuck with, huh...?'* he thought to himself as a sinister grin spread across his face. *"Ha! This is gonna be a cinch!"

Sakura's green eyes hardened as she drew a kunai, positioning herself for an attack. *"Think again!"

--

Naruto just barely managed to avoid the kunai aimed at her head, firing off one of her own in retaliation as she leapt away from the approaching ninja with Ran in tow.

Satoru watched her with an amused smirk on his face. *"Y'know, I don't get you Leaf ninja,"* he muttered absently.

The blonde touched down on a tree branch several meters above the ground. *"I'm not surprised,"* she scowled in return. *"I'm not a murderer or a traitor to my home village... I can see how that can be confusing to you."

The older ninja let out a laugh. *"So the brat's got spunk to go along with those guts of hers,"* His smirk widened. *"No wonder you got Yoko's feathers so ruffled."* He pulled out another kunai, twirling it expertly in his fingers. *"She wants to slit your throat, y'know."

Ran let out a whimper and Naruto narrowed her eyes, watching the nuke-nin for any sudden movements. *"Yeah well, she better get in line..."*
The ninja from Kumo let out another laugh. "You're one funny kid!" he exclaimed. "But I'm afraid I'm gonna have to kill you and the little kid. Nothin' personal, of course."

The younger kunoichi bared her teeth in a snarl. "You can try!"

"Don't have to."

Blue eyes widened at the voice suddenly coming from behind. Naruto whirled around, letting out a startled curse at the sight of the copper haired nin suddenly standing behind her. With a grin at the expression on her and Ran's faces, he raised his kunai once more, preparing to drive it in for the kill. Before she could even attempt to evade, a figure blurred in front of her with a glowing blade of chakra. Shuya touched down on the branch before them, lunging out towards Satoru with a sideways slash of his blade.

The ninja jumped back, eyeing the tear in his gi with an appraising eye. "Hn... not bad, kid... not bad at all..."

Shuya repositioned himself in a defensive stance, his blade held steady before him. "You won't lay a hand on Ran," he growled. "I won't allow it!"

Satoru snorted. "I got news for you, kid... I'm a ninja." He brought up his kunai once again, hurling it towards them with a practiced flick of his wrist. "I don't hafta use my hands!"

The young swordsman easily deflected the kunai with his sword, only to let out a short curse at the sight of the enemy nin charging towards them.

Naruto scowled angrily. "Oh no you don't!" Letting go of Ran, she brought her hands up into a familiar cross seal, letting out a cry of, "KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!"

Satoru's eyes widened at the appearance of several dozen orange clad clones. So, she really could create solid bunshin. "How 'bout that..."

Several of the blondes let out a growl, charging towards the older ninja head on. He held his ground with his kunai raised, plowing through them with a half-smirk on his face.

"Something funny?" one clone snarled.

"You better take us seriously!" another growled, drawing out a kunai.

The Kumo-ninja paused, his smirk suddenly turning dangerous. "With pleasure."

--

Two more clones, flanking Ran on either side, turned their attention to the young swordsman following the battle with wide, dark blue eyes. "Shuya!" one called, gently guiding Ran over to him. "Look after Ran-chan. We'll take care of this!"

He watched as Satoru ruthlessly tore through one of her other clones, laughing viciously before moving onto the next. "But..."

"Fighting this jackass is not your job," said the second clone.
"It's ours!" added the third. "Now get moving!"

He gazed at her silently for a few tense seconds, her words from the other night echoing loudly in his head.

~ "You know we're here to help you an' Ran-chan, right? We're not like whoever hurt you before." ~

~ "We won't run away. We won't give up. We'll do whatever it takes to help you, but you gotta tell us how..." ~

He clenched his fists tightly, torn. It wasn't right for her to be risking herself like this... it wasn't even her fight! "Uzumaki-san..."

One of the blondes turned back his way, her blue eyes glinting sharply. "Shuya," she said, her voice stern. "Why are you a samurai?"

He paused, his eyes going to the young, teary eyed girl beside him. "...Because I have something I want to protect..."

She nodded at him before fixing him with a smile that showed off a pointed canine. "Then get moving!" Without another word, she took off with a kunai in hand to rejoin the fray.

"Uzumaki-san!" he called out, watching her retreating back. As she rejoined the battle with the rogue ninja and the other blonde duplicates - had she been a clone as well or the original? - he clenched his sword tightly in hand. Hoisting Ran up to his chest with his other hand, he took off in a quick burst of speed. "Please... be careful..."

End Chapter 36b
Chapter 37: Soldier

Chapter Summary

How far are you willing to go for the sake of the mission...?

Chapter 37

Branches snatched and tore at his clothing as he sprinted through the forest, but Shuya paid them no heed. He clutched his precious bundle – the catatonic Ran - closer his chest, while clutching his unsheathed sword tightly in his free hand.

He couldn't believe he'd just run off and left the blonde behind! He hadn't any choice of course, the thought of the younger girl left facing that awful man alone left him feeling sick and anxious.

"Please… please be careful," he murmured softly. "Uzumaki-s-san…"

Mention of the hyperactive blonde seemed to rouse the young girl in his arms out her stupor. She tensed, gripping at his arm tightly. "Sempai?" she called out. "Where is Kiiroi-s-senpai?!

Shuya glanced down at the pale face of his sist-young charge, the guilt in his chest doubling in weight. "We had to leave her, Ran-chan," he answered. "It wasn't safe!"

Frightened blue eyes shot up to his, widening and then clamping shut as the young girl suddenly began struggling against his hold. "No! No!"

"Ran-chan!" Afraid of dropping her, Shuya skidded to a stop as he tried to tighten his hold on her. "Stop it!"

"No! No! No!" Ran cried out, beating at his chest with tiny little fists. "Let me go, Shuya!"

The dark haired boy froze, his grip loosening almost instantly. 'Shuya'… but she never… "Wha…?"

"I want to go back to Sempai!" Ran exclaimed. "I want to stay with her!"

Snapping out of his shock, Shuya gazed down at the girl sternly. "You can't go back there, Ran," he said firmly. "It's not safe!"

"It's not true!" she shot back. "You're just saying that 'cuz you want to get rid of me!"

Her words cut sharper than the blade still held loosely in his hand. "What...? Ran, that's not true!"

"It is-I heard you!" Fat tears ran down the little girl's cheeks. "You don't want me anymore so you're gonna give me away..."

The older boy froze, staring at her in shock. When her quiet snuffles turned into sobs, he knelt down, pulling her into a hug. "Oh, Ran-chan... I would never give you away! Never!"

"Aww... isn't this touching?"
Shuya froze, his eyes shooting to the scar-faced nukenin leaning casually against a branch in the
tree behind them. "You…?!"

At his startled expression, the rogue grinned a feral grin. "You seem surprised," he murmured
casually. "You mean you actually thought that little Leaf punk could hold me off?"

The young samurai gritted his teeth, ignoring the painful knot of guilt in his chest. "What have you
done to her…?"

"Nothing," he answered casually. "Can't say the same for my senbon though…"

Senbon…? Shuya froze, remembering the three needle-like objects that had protruded out of
Auntie's arm. Had Naruto really been forced to suffer the same fate? "No…"

The younger girl in his arms trembled, gripping at his haori like a lifeline as she whimpered softly.
"Big brother…"

"Well, kids," Satoru sighed, drawing another kunai out of a pouch at his waist. "This is the end of
the line for you two… Sorry!" Although by his expression it was clear to see he wasn't really sorry
at all.

Clutching Ran tightly to his chest, Shuya waited for the inevitable. 'Father, mother, Touga-sama…
please forgive me…' He closed his eyes. 'Ran-chan…!'

"OI!"

A loud thud sounding in his ears, Shuya opened dark blue eyes to the sight of an orange clad
blonde body tackling the rogue ninja, the two falling down a few feet to touch down on separate
branches. Seeing the girl looking relatively in one piece – although a bit dusty with a torn, bloody
sleeve – the young samurai let out a heavy sigh of relief. She was still alive!

"Uzumaki-san!"

Blue eyes shot to him before focusing back on her opponent. "Keep it moving, Shuya!" she
cautioned.

"Sempai!" Ran called out. Two clones touched down beside them, urging them to their feet. "No,
no… I don't wanna stay with Shuya, I wanna stay with Sempai!"

Shuya's heart clenched with pain, but he stayed silent.

"Ran-chan," one of the clones called out gently. "You hafta stay with Shuya." The little girl opened
her mouth to object, but she beat her to the point. "You wanna know why?"

Ran shook her head, but the other clone giggled. "It's 'cuz he needs ya."

"Not true," she muttered.

"Is too." The first clone countered. "You're his Ran-chan… the only Ran-chan he has. He wants to
do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

Dark blue eyes met the clones' light blue ones. "But he was gonna send me away… he doesn't
wanna be my big brother anymore…"

"Now you know that's not true," the first clone chided. "You an' Shuya might not be related by
blood, but that doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what anybody says or does, it doesn't matter what
happens from here on out…” She paused, gazing at Shuya earnestly before turning her attention back to the little teary eyed girl before her. "No matter what, Shuya will always be your big brother."

Ran gazed at her quietly before turning her attention to Shuya. "Really?" she asked softly.

Shuya nodded. "Really." Kneeling down before her, he held out his arms. "Can you find it in your heart to forgive me, Ran-chan… and let me stay with you…?"

The little girl's eyes teared up again as she dove into his arms. "Yes, yes, yes!" she exclaimed. "I always wanna stay with you, Onii-sama! Always, always, always!"

The young samurai smiled softly, hugging the smaller girl tightly. Turning his attention to the two grinning clones, his smile turned grateful. "Thank you, Uzumaki-san…"

"What can we say…?" the first clone grinned.

"We have an 'big brother', too!"

The samurai chuckled briefly, before hugging Ran tightly once again. "Come on," he urged. "Let's keep moving."

"Right!"

He scooped Ran up into his arms once more, turning once more towards the trees. Only the occasional flash of light through the darkness gave any indication that there was a battle raging. He paused, staring down at the sword in his hands.

"Shuya…" one of the clones called urgently.

He glanced at them, before turning his attention back to the little girl in his arms. Her blue eyes gazed up at him, full of love and trust and innocence… What would happen to them if some harm became her beloved 'Kiiroi-sempai'? He couldn't leave… not like this.

"Uzumaki-san," he called. One of the clones stepped forward, blinking as he placed Ran into her open arms.

"Shuya…?"

"I'll be back, Ran-chan," he vowed. "I promise." Gripping his sword hilt tightly, he turned and sprinted off into the trees.

"Oi, Shuya! Shuya!"

---

Sakura leapt through the trees, dodging the broken branches and debris that rained down upon her. Touching down against a tree trunk, she ducked just as the Iwa-ninja Kaji swung a heavy fist at her head, leaving a gaping hole in his wake. Drawing a few shuriken out of her weapon's pouch, she hurled them towards him as he ambled away once more.

Kaji ducked the first two, parrying the remainders off with a kunai as he sneered at her. "How long are you gonna keep running away, you little brat?" he snarled

"Do you really think I'm going to stand there and let you hit me?" she called out as she darted further up into the tree canopy. Taking a page out of Naruto's proverbial playbook, she grinned
impishly over her shoulder. "Wow, you're slow in more ways than one!"

The rogue ninja snarled out a curse, ramming his fist into the tree, splitting the bark all the way up to the stop. The large oak split apart, chunks of wood and sawdust flying out everywhere.

The leaf kunoichi's gasped in surprise as she jumped away to the branch of a neighboring tree, touching down on an outlying branch softly. 'Wow... *those punches of his are no joke!* Green eyes studied her opponent keenly, looking for anything that might assist her. 'He's a powerhouse for sure, but fortunately he's slow as an ox... He uses all his chakra to enhance his strength, but it doesn't leave a lot for much else...'

Briefly she pondered whether he was unable to use ninjutsu like her fellow genin Rock Lee, but decided she didn't want to try her luck.

'*If I can somehow find a way to incapacitate him... I can get back to the others...*' She frowned briefly at the thought of running back to the others for safety, but shook it away. Here was neither the place nor the time to be having self doubts. Her teammates were depending on her!

At the brief mention of the taijutsu master, Sakura's thoughts went to his prodigal teammate, the stoic #1 Rookie of their graduating class, Neji. As a Hyuuga, he had the ability to pinpoint weakness in an opponent via their chakra pathways, disabling them with a single touch.

'But I'm no Hyuuga...' she thought glumly to herself. 'I wouldn't know how to disrupt someone's chakra flow with chakra. But...' She paused, a small smirk spreading across her face as a mental light bulb went off above her head.

A quick search through her weapon's pouch yielded the items necessary for her plan. In her mind, Inner-Sakura gave out a loud cheer. *WE ARE A GENIUS!! SHANNARO!!*

---

Catching another flash of pink out of the corner of his eye, Kaji laid waste to another tree branch. Another muttered curse spilled from his lips when it yielded no little Leaf genin.

"Y'know... maybe you should try something else... That punch and curse thing doesn't seem to be working."

The stocky nuke-nin snarled in rage. "Damn it, come out and face me! I'll tear you apart with my bare hands!"

"I can't let you do that. I have a mission to carry out!"

"Yeah well, I got one, too," Kaji paused, a sneer spreading across his face. "To gut that little Samurai friend of yours - and his little brat sister, too!"

A kunai flew fast and true out of the darkness, knocked off course at the last moment by one of Kaji's own. Following its path, he charged into the trees, blowing through everything in his path. A few seconds later he spotted the pink-haired kunoichi leaping from branch to branch several yards off. A smirk that promised violence spread across his face as he sprinted towards her.

Closing the distance between them, he raised his kunai to strike. "I've gotcha now, you little bi-" He blinked as the young girl vanished before his eyes. "A bunshin? Damn it..." Another pink-haired kunoichi darted into his line of vision, only to be wiped out of existence by one of his kunai. "Another trick..."
A rustle of leaves drew his attention down a few branches, to where another Sakura made a rude face before leaping away again. Allowing his frustration to get the better of him, he charged off after her, drawing another kunai from his pouch. "Just wait’ll I get my hands on-"

With his attention focused on the elusive girl leaping away into the canopy, he didn't spot the kunoichi that barreled down on top of him, swinging a chakra-powered kick directly at his chin. He hurtled backwards with a startled cry, slamming into the tree bark.

Sakura touched down several meters away, drawing a kunai out of her pouch. Wasting no time, she hurled it at him with all her might. 'C’mon…hit the mark!'

Although dazed by her blow, Kaji unfortunately recovered quickly. Spotting the projectile hurtling towards him, he ducked at the last moment, charging forward with surprising speed. Before the young genin could let out an exclamation of surprise, a quick backhanded slap had her sliding into the same spot she'd landed him.

"Did you really think I was gonna let myself be taken down by a weak little thing like you!" he spat. "Pathetic!"

Dazed and disoriented, Sakura slowly pulled herself into a sitting position, clenching her fists in frustration. Was this really the best she could do? Was she really that weak? Pale eyes watched the hulking figure stalking towards her, fists clenched and eyes flashing with the promise of violence.

'Get up, Sakura…' she told herself, willing her trembling limbs to respond. Unfortunately her body still seemed to be reeling from the hit she'd been dealt. 'Get up! You're a ninja of the Leaf… you have to fight!'~

Hadn't she made a promise to herself to become stronger? To make herself worthy of being Naruto and Sasuke's teammate?

~ "You shouldn't hafta worry about being on the frontlines, Sakura-chan… You're still important to the team, no matter what." ~

She didn't want to be the one standing on the sidelines anymore. Ninja who abandoned their comrades were worse than trash; she didn't want to be that kind of ninja!

~"With Sasuke as the skill and me as the strength, the three of us make up one complete ninja!"~

'But…' She winced as the world spun, the enemy in her vision blurring out of sight briefly. 'How can I stand beside them… when I can't even stand on my own?!'

Eyeing the tragic expression that skirted across her face, Kaji smirked in victory. "Just like I thought…" he chortled. "Pathetic…"

Sakura froze, her eyes widening.

The muscular nin took another step towards her, pulling a large fist back. His smirk morphed into a wild, victorious grin as he crowed out, "Time to say goodbye, tree-hugger!"

"Good bye,"

Kaji froze, his exclamation being drowned out by a sound similar to that of a thousand chirping birds. As he turned to discern its source, his eyes met Sharingan red just as lightning charged hand rammed into his chest.
Sakura let out a sharp gasp, her pale eyes wide at the sudden appearance of her male teammate. "Sa...Sasuke-kun...?" He didn't meet her eyes, watching dispassionately as the large Iwa-nin toppled over the side of the tree branch to the unyielding ground below. She watched as several black marks receded back into the seal at his neck. 'What have you done...?'

"KAJI!!" The Kiri-nin Yoko appeared on a tree branch several yards off, her clothes singed and her hair wild.

"Damn it," the Uchiha muttered. "I thought I got her..."

"You killed him..." Anger and disbelief warred for supremacy on the visible half of the mist kunoichi's face. "I can't believe you killed him..." Anger eventually won out, morphing into all-out rage. "DAMN YOU!!" Drawing her hands out of her voluminous sleeves, she began forming seals at a breakneck pace.

Sasuke tensed, eyeing the older ninja warily. He'd been able to counteract a majority of her suiton attacks so far with his own katon ninjutsu, but he was starting to feel the strain. The very use of that last Chidori had put a significant drain on his reserves. Still... Drawing a kunai out of his weapon's pouch, he took up a guard stance in front of his pink haired teammate.

Sakura stared at the red and white mon on his back blankly for a few seconds before snapping out of her stupor. Pushing herself to her feet slowly but surely, she too drew a kunai and prepared for the oncoming attack. However, taking in the mist ninja's current position, she felt a brief jolt of hope. "Sasuke-kun..." she murmured softly.

Red and black eyes darted over to her before focusing back on their enemy. "Hn?"

She reached into her weapons pouch, discreetly palming a tag to wrap around the handle of her kunai. "We're gonna want to get out of here very soon... very fast..."

The Uchiha raised an eyebrow in confusion, but didn't comment. He tensed his body, preparing himself for whatever came next.

Above them, Yoko let out a wild snarl of rage. "We are the Joukuu-Koudo-Umi..." she growled. "We're not about to be beaten by a bunch of sniveling little brats! I will not allow it!"

"You can still walk away from this," Sakura murmured, tightening her grip on her kunai. "Stand down!"

The mist-kunoichi hissed in fury. "DIE!" Drawing upon large sums of chakra, she conjured a large wave of water out of thin air that amassed above her head, coalescing into a serpent's head. "SUITON – Suiryu-"

"NOW!" Sakura hurled the kunai with all her might. The blade flew straight and true, right into the mass of water forming about the mist ninja's head. Forming a quick hand seal as she leapt away, Sasuke right at her heels – she watched as the tag on her kunai activated with a surge of electricity. Using the water as a current, it arced along until it reached the several dozen electrical tags positioned on the tree branch on which the nukenin stood.

The kiri-nin barely had time to let out a scream before she was consumed within a loud explosion, her electrical charged monstrosity collapsing on top of her. Within moments, Mist ninja Yoko was no more.

---
Several hundred yards away, Sasuke regarded ground zero with a thoughtful expression. He turned his attention to his teammate, dark eyes curious. "I take it that was meant for the big one?"

Still trying to catch her breath, Sakura glanced up at him with a rueful smirk. "He caught me off guard before I could lead him into it," she murmured, cursing herself again for her folly. If only she had been--

"It worked though,"

She blinked, staring up at him in surprise. "Huh?"

Sasuke met her gaze, his expression still thoughtful. "You're getting stronger, Sakura."

Her cheeks flushing a bright pink, the young kunoichi stared up at her teammate in awe. "Sasuke-kun…"

As if realizing he had unknowingly bestowed a compliment, Sasuke turned away, fixing his usual bored scowl back into place. "Let's get moving," he muttered. "Who knows what kind of trouble that moron's in?"

Sakura nodded dutifully, watching the Uchiha's back as he bounded off. 'Thank you… Sasuke-kun…'

--

Halting his assault, Satoru gazed off into the forest, frowning when he could no longer sense the chakra signatures of his teammates. His scarred face twisted into a scowl. "So they actually got killed, huh…?" He spat in distaste. "Useless…"

Naruto stared at him, appalled at his reaction. The guy seemed more annoyed than upset! "Your teammates are dead…" she murmured slowly. "Don't you care at all?"

The kumo-ninja regarded her for a second before twisting his features into a sneer. "Seriously…?" he snorted. "A pair like those two are a dime a dozen… they can easily be replaced."

Was he serious? The blonde genin stared at him in disbelief. She tightened her grip on her kunai almost to the point of pain. "You kill anyone who gets in your way… even harmless old ladies like Nozomi-baachan… and then you don't even show any loyalty to your comrades!" Her eyes hardened, cutting into him with barely concealed fury. "What kind of ninja are you?!"

"Are you kidding?" Satoru snorted. "You're almost as bad as those samurai… all that crap about honor and dignity…" He paused, chuckling to himself. "Y'know, I was probably doing them a favor by wiping them out… They'd become obsolete…Given enough time, us ninja will be, too."

"If that's how you feel about it, why are you even doing this?" Naruto snarled.

Satoru laughed again. "For the money, why else!" He laughed at the thunderstruck expression on the small blonde's face. "Wow, are you really that naive?!"

"You're disgusting," Naruto spat. "You don't care about anything at all, do you?"

Gray eyes hardened like flint. "Now you're gettin' it!"

Furious, Naru charged towards him with a Chakra spade half-formed in hand. She made it halfway before she was knocked backwards by a surge of electricity.
Satoru watched dispassionately as the small blonde flopped bonelessly back against the tree branch, her body still twitching slightly from the onslaught. "Well… that takes care of that," he murmured when she finally went still. "Gotta admit she was a tough one… I've never seen anybody walk away from my senbon trap – each one of those things is loaded with enough toxin to drop an elephant." He turned to walk away, only to pause. "Although… I suppose I better be certain… look what happened the last time I thought a job was done…"

A small cough resounded form the still blonde, followed by a muttered expletive. The kumo ninja let out a startled laugh. "What? *Still* alive? Ever after all that?" The electrical charge of that Raiton had been equal to a dozen lightning bolts. At the very least, her heart should have burst! Gray eyes stared at the little tree hugger in disbelief. "Just what the hell are you…?"

"I'm…" Naruto struggled to rise to her feet, but found her limbs wouldn't obey her commands. "A ninja of the Leaf!"

"Damn…" Satoru murmured. "Konoha's makin' tougher than they used to, it seems…" He smirked, watching the blonde struggle with a detached sort of amusement. "You're tougher than I thought, kid… I'm sure you could be useful – whaddya say about joining me?"

Blue eyes shot up to him, incredulous. "Are you out of your mind?! Hell no!"

"Well… I figured as much… didn't hurt to ask though…" Shrugging his shoulders casually, Satoru drew another kunai. "Guess it's time to wrap things up here." Brandishing it neatly, he trudged towards her slowly.

Naruto's eyes widened. 'Damn it…' She forced herself slowly to her feet, cursing herself when her vision blurred. Once it cleared, she suddenly found Satoru directly in front of her with his kunai raised. 'Shit… this isn't good…'

Preparing to bring his blade down for the kill, Satoru was halted in his tracks by the sight of another blade protruding out of his chest. He let out a startled sound of surprise, glancing over his shoulder at the dark haired samurai holding the hilt steady in pale hands.

"You…?"

Naruto blinked in surprise. "Shuya…"

Withdrawning his blade neatly, Shuya kept his gaze on Satoru, his eyes dark. "For six years I lived in shame, bearing the brunt of my family's dishonor… But no longer…" Readjusting his footing, he tightened his grip on his hilt, raising the blade high. With a strong swing his arms, the chakra charged steel arced down, neatly detaching the rogue ninja's head from his shoulders.

With another quick swipe to rid it of any debris, the young samurai quickly sheathed his blade, holding it upwards. "On this day, I hereby declare the noble Hiyami family and the honorable Miyamoto clan to be avenged." Tucking it blade away, the young man took on a penitent stance. "Touga-sama, father, mother… please be at peace…"

"They will be…" Naruto murmured after a few moments of respectful silence. Shuya opened his eyes to gaze at her and she smiled. "Now that they know you and Ran-chan are finally safe…"

He nodded, giving her a small smile. "Yes…"

Sasuke and Sakura touched down on a nearby tree branch moments later, eyes wide as they took in the scene.
"It's over?" Sakura asked.

Naruto nodded. "Thanks to Shuya!"

The young samurai shook his head. "It was thanks to you," he said softly. "Thank you… thank you so much, Uzumaki-san…"

"I thought I told you, Shuya," she said solemnly. After a few seconds a wide grin spread across her face. "I never, ever go back on my word!"

He nodded, smiling back. "Of course."

Sakura let out a loud sigh of relief. "Thank goodness that's over!" she exclaimed.

"Not yet it isn't," Sasuke frowned, his Sharingan reactivating.

The others froze, their bodies going on the alert just as several Kumo-ninja touched down around them.

Shuya eyed them warily, taking up a guard stance in front of Naruto as he drew his sword once more.

"Wait!" one of the ninja, a non-descript young man about his age, stepped forward with his hands raised. "Osamurai-san! We're not here to fight!"

"Who are you?" Sasuke replied.

"My name is Okubo," he answered, drawing out what looked to be an official seal. Shuya gasped, recognizing it as the Hiyami family mon. "We've been sent by Lady Misao of the Hiyami family to escort you to safety."

Team 7 turned to Shuya, who nodded. After a few seconds, two orange clad clones dropped down from the trees, one of them carrying Ran piggy-back.

Okubo blinked before fixing his face back into a neutral expression. "We can go whenever you are ready, Miyamoto-san,"

He nodded, glancing at the others. "You're coming?"

"Ya damn right we are!" Naruto exclaimed. "We got you this far – you're not getting rid of us that easily!"

Shuya blinked a moment before allowing a grin to spread across his face. "I'm glad to hear it."

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After a few hours travel, the kumo ninja and an exhausted Team 7 touched down in a clearing filled by a large caravan. A dark haired woman dressed in a fine kimono, looks up at their arrival, letting out a sharp gasp of surprise.

Although it had been a few years, Shuya recognized her instantly. "Mi-misao-dono…"

"Shuya-kun!" She rushed over to him, enveloping him in a tight hug. "Oh thank goodness! Thank goodness you're all right!" She took a step back to regard him, her eyes welling up with tears. "Oh, I can't believe you're actually here…" Trailing off, she spotted the little blue head of hair peeking out from behind his haori-sleeve. "And Ran…"
At the sound of her name, she ducked back behind her brother once more.

"Ran…" Shuya called out softly.

"It's all right…" Misao smiled through her tears. "I'm just so happy to see you both alive and well! Come with me, we've so much to discuss!"

Shuya glanced over his shoulder at the Konoha team before nodding dutifully. "Yes, Misao-dono…" Taking his sister's hand, he quietly shuffled after the older woman, his head bowed respectfully.

The three watched them go, a myriad of expressions on their faces.

"What do you suppose happens now?" Sakura asked.

"We get the three of you cleaned up, that's what," a voice called out. "You look a mess!"

Naruto turned, blinking at the sight of the white haired Toad Sage. "Ero-sennin?!” she exclaimed. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Making sure you're not dead," he snorted. "Youth these days… so ungrateful…"

A female attendant in an ocher yukata approached them, giving a brief bow. "Please make yourselves comfortable in one of the caravan wagons," she said kindly. "A medic will be over shortly to treat any injuries you may have."

The Sage eyed her appreciatively, a leering grin making its way across his face. "Well, that's so kind of you!"

Sakura twitched at the expression on his face. 'Geez, doesn't he ever give it a rest?!' Waiting for Naruto to voice her own objections to his behavior, she was surprised to find her watching Misao, Shuya, and Ran in the distance. It wasn't clear what they were discussing, but it had to be serious judging by the expression on the young samurai's face.

"What do you suppose they're discussing?" she asked.

"His fate."

The three youths turned to the Sage. "Huh?"

"Your friend belongs to a samurai clan who was under the employ of Lady Misao's family," he explained. "He was given a mission to protect the heir until she could assume her rightful place as a Hiyami. After that, his mission is over."

Remembering his talk about seppuku, Sakura let out a gasp of dismay. "You don't suppose he'd…"


Jiraiya glanced at her before turning his attention back to the figures in the distance. "That may not be up to him to decide."

Misao touched Shuya's shoulder gently, the young man nodding dutifully. After a few moments, he knelt down, hugging Ran tightly.

"Wha… what happened?" Sakura asked.
"We're about to find out in a few seconds," Sasuke murmured, watching as Shuya released the young girl, allowing her to rush towards them. Shuya and Misao followed at a more sedate pace.

"Ran-chan?" Naruto called out as the younger girl plowed into her legs. "Everything okay?"

Ran lifted her head, grinning up at her brightly. "Guess what, Sempai, guess what?"

"What?"

If possible, the little girl's grin widened even further. "Onii-sama is gonna be my *real* brother now!"

"Eh?"

Shuya smiled at the joy radiating off of the younger girl, before turning his attention to the ninja to provide clarification. "Although Ran-chan is the heir, Misao-dono is still the acting head of the Hiyami family. As such, she adopted me into the family."

"That's great!" Sakura exclaimed.

Ran bobbed her head. "Now me an' big brother will always be family! Just like Sempai said! Right, Sempai?" She paused, her smile slipping slightly when the blonde didn't respond. "Sempai?"

The others turned their attention to her, frowning in confusion. "Naruto…?" Jiraiya called.

The blonde had a hand to her temple, shaking her head as if trying to clear it. "Damn…" she muttered. "Everything's still blurry…"

"Whaddya mean 'still'…?" the Sage asked, stepping towards her with mounting worry. The little blonde looked deathly pale, and --despite the small girl's grip on her legs--seemed to be wobbling a bit. "How long have been feeling like this…?"

"Since the senbon trap… thought I'd dodged them all…"

"Senbon?" Jiraiya echoed, turning his attention to Okubo.

"Satoru is notorious for using poisoned senbon," the oinin answered. "The toxin usually kills the victim within minutes…"

"Auntie…" Shuya murmured softly.

"NARUTO!!"

All eyes shot to the blonde as she crumpled to the ground. Ran let out a worried cry, tugging at the unresponsive blonde.

The Sannin let out a curse, rushing to her side. Cradling her in his arms, he was startled at how cold she was. "We need a medic – NOW!"

"Naruto!" Sakura called out.

"Naruto…?"

"NARUTO!!"

End Chapter 37~
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