Butterfly Child

by KlonoaDreams

Summary

I was never a fan of irony, even more so after died. I should be pretty happy that I was given a second chance at life, except guess who's still irony's bitch? Yo. My name is Akimichi Chōko and I just wanna live... SI OC
Rebirth

Chapter Notes

Is it too late for me to jump in on the SI OC bandwagon for Naruto? Yeah, inspiration came from Dreaming of Sunshine by Silver Queen (READ IT), and many other SI OC Naruto fics. I know I have other fics to work on, but I have been itching to write a SI OC fic and decided to get it out of my system by making this fic. Also, standard disclaimer!
Disclaimer for whole story: I don't own Naruto or anything related to the Naruto franchise! I am in no ways Masashi Kishimoto, nor will I ever be!
I am but a simple, struggling college student just trying to make it through the end of the term with passing grade and some money…so please do not sue me. More information will be given in the ending A/N, so read on, my fellow readers!

3-31-18 So it's been like three years and I'm pretty much gonna try my best to get back on this fic after going through and editing ALL 41 chapters of this fic. Just here to remind everyone that Butterfly Child DOES have a tvtropes page and there is now a strawpoll for the shipping games, so do feel free to contribute!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Death was something I had never thought would happen to me so early in life. I mean, I was always careful about what I did. I might have had some days when I wasn't feeling so great…but I always bounced back. I had goals I wanted to fulfill and, if I were to be honest…I was afraid of dying.

I wanted to live as long as I wanted to, but that was no longer an option I had anymore. I'm not sure what happened, but I'm guessing I must've missed a step—wait, no, I recall tripping on my shoelaces when I fell down those stairs. Everything after that was a blur.

Darkness soon greeted me and my first reaction was to panic. I don't like the dark—not like this! Not when it came so suddenly after what had happened. I never even had a chance to react…

And yet…I somehow feel safe. Whatever sense of panic I had was starting to wane once it came to my attention that there was comfort in the darkness that surrounded me. There was also warmth and I felt like I was floating…in water? Why would there be water?

Why was I still aware? Was I really dead? I don't know…

There was just something wrong with this and yet…I don't mind at all. I was safe…and, frankly, that's all that mattered to me.

That's all I really wanted to care about, anyways…

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I don't exactly know how long I've stayed in this state. Sometimes, I drifted off into what felt like a deep sleep. Other times, I was restless, having grown bored with the lack of anything in my
surroundings. It was during those times that my restlessness seemed to have had an impact as every so often, I heard voices.

The voices were oddly comforting despite the many questions I had about them. Like, why was I hearing voices? Should I be concerned that I was hearing voices? I never had this issue before my untimely death.

And yet, I stopped caring because the voices were never harsh. They were always gentle and just…I felt loved.

It took some time, but I eventually grew accustomed to the voices. Sometimes, I purposely enticed the voices with my restlessness. It was my only source of entertainment throughout my constant boredom, and I loved it.

There was one thing I never anticipated and it was only until I was roused from my sleep by a small touch that made me realize I wasn't alone. I panicked and, for the first time since I found myself in darkness, I was aware of my movement.

Suddenly, the darkness didn't seem so safe anymore…and it was only until the voices returned that my sense of security returned. Not exactly the best experience I ever had and I'm really glad that it was short-lived…

Since then, I was vaguely aware that, within this darkness, there was another being with me. I don't know what it was or how long it had been there, but it had a tendency to wake me up when I felt most comfortable…and that was not cool. So I tried to return the favor every once in a while because it was only fair. This resulted in my unknown neighbor and me exchanging touches with each other. I was not at all surprised that this became part of whatever routine I had, as time passed on. Nor was I surprised that I grew accustomed to my neighbor's presence.

Of course, it was not meant to last. The once comfortable and safe darkness suddenly became terrifyingly uncomfortable and dangerous. What felt like walls started to close in on me and my neighbor…and suddenly, my neighbor was gone. I was alone…and the walls kept closing in on me. It was a horrible thing to ever experience…

And then all of a sudden, there was harsh brightness. I had grown so used to the pitch-black darkness that the sudden introduction of light hurt. The warmth I had grown so used to was now gone, replaced with a cold temperature that made everything so fucking uncomfortable. I could only see in a blur and I could hear crying. The sound was so shrill and startling for me, having grown used to silence and the occasional voices that were always so gentle.

It was only natural that I reacted with crying of my own—now that I could actually cry. I was terrified, scared of my new environment, and traumatized by the loss of my old one. I could feel hands on me, which felt so foreign to me after going so long without being touched by someone other than my neighbor. I had no idea who it was, as I could not see, only hear and feel. And from what I could feel, these hands felt abnormally big. Or was it that I was just small?

Who the fuck knows?!

I couldn't confirm either, because I can't see! I don't think I can do anything but cry and that was just so frustrating because I felt so helpless. I don't like this—I don't want this!

I wailed at the top of my lungs as I felt myself being handled. I would have kept crying, but then I heard that voice—the one I heard from time to time when there was nothing but darkness around me. Slowly, I started to calm down, having latched onto the sense of security I found in the voice's
familiarity. It was at that time that I felt something prod my mouth and I don't know why, but I latched onto it and began to suck.

What the actual fuck?!

I did not have any control over that action and that was just scary. Like, what the hell?! My body just reacted on its own. What. The. Fucking. Hell?! Stuff like that doesn't happen—it's not supposed to happen!

At least, that was what I thought until I recalled what I had learned in psychology about primitive reflexes, or more specifically, the rooting reflex. And from what I recalled about the rooting reflex, it involves breastfeeding and the automatic response an infant has when something strokes either their cheek or mouth. This gave me a clear understanding on what the hell had just happened (and why the hell my body was acting on its own).

I was a baby…a baby that was just born and oh god, there are some things I should NOT have to go through, but apparently, fate hates me. That was probably a given considering I died falling down the stairs…via tripping on my shoelaces.

I NEVER trip on my shoelaces…yet it happened. So here I am, born again and given a second chance at life…because reincarnation is actually a thing.

I guess I'll take this second chance. It's not that bad…of course, I did leave behind my family and I just…I shouldn't think too much about it. This is a one-way ticket to depression and I'm not sure a newborn should be dealing with these sorts of feelings.

It hurts to think too much...

I feel warm…and safe. Everything wasn't so terrifying anymore. This is good…I should learn to appreciate what I have before shit hits the fan—and by that, I mean the joys of being a baby. Because if being an aunt has taught me anything when it came to interacting with the spawn of my siblings, it was that babies go through a lot of things during their first year. Oh boy, I am not ready to go through teething—I could barely even stand my wisdom teeth when they started to grow back in my previous life!

Wait—I'm forgetting something…if I was just born, then back there…

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Welp, looks like I'm a twin—I mean, considering the fact that I had a neighbor back there and the interactions we had, it's safe to assume I have a twin. And if that's the case (it's most likely the case), I can only wonder if I'm an identical or fraternal twin. I'll probably have to wait to until I can see something before I can confirm anything. But that's the least of my worries. I'm just happy with the idea of growing up with someone—I've always wanted a twin.

So maybe reincarnation isn't that bad…then I noticed that the people around me were speaking in a different language—is that Japanese I hear?

Aww, shit, looks like I have to learn another language. Well, it could be worse…I wonder what my name is…

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It took me over a month to gather what my name is, since I was usually asleep (and when I wasn't, I was being fed, but I rather not talk about that...). I had to listen in a lot for any patterns in speech, which was honestly difficult because I don't know Japanese and being a baby means having shitty vision and not-so-great hearing (I can only pick up a few things at a time).

Chōko...that's what they called me. My name is Chōko...and I'm fine with that. Chōji is the name of my fraternal twin brother (who I would later find out was thirteen minutes older than me), and he's part of the reason I had a hard time figuring out what my name was. Because for a short amount of time, I thought my name was Chōji.

Speaking of Chōji, he was currently poking my cheek, as the two of us laid in our crib, side-by-side. I returned the action with a similar touch to his own cheek. I had a weird sense of déjà vu at that time.

I could hear laughter coming from my parents, those two most likely finding my interactions with my twin amusing. They always thought it was cute how Chōji and I acted around each other. At the moment, I found the swirl marks on my brother's cheeks to be extremely interesting. Like...were they always there?

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I'm not the most perceptive person around and being a baby only made that even worse. I was always aware there was something on Chōji's cheeks, but it was only until now that I have a vague idea of the shape (my vision is still not the best).

Huh, red swirls—so that's what they were all this time...that's cool. Do I have some on my face? Wait, are these birthmarks—do birthmarks work like that? Ugh, my head...wait...why does this seem so familiar?

What's there to find familiar about?

Hell if I know, I just want to go to sleep now because my head hurts. My little infant brain is not developed enough for this shit...Chōji, please stop touching me, I'm not in the mood—OH HELL NO.

I just had a horrifying realization...and even though I'm really hoping my brain is just making random shit up, I can't help but notice that there's something wrong with the fact that I have a twin brother named Chōji. I mean, it could just be coincidence that his name is Chōji, since I'm Chōko, but the red markings on his face are telling me otherwise because they shouldn't be there—but they are and oh god, why are they there?!

I must have been fussy because I was picked up by one of my parents—my father, most likely by the tone of his voice. My father tried his best to calm me down, but I was just having such a bad time coping with the idea that the unthinkable had happened when I was reincarnated. And what a great time to finally get a good look (as good as it can get with this shitty vision) at your own father's face than now?!

The second I saw the red hair and purple markings on his cheeks, I realized that my father was Akimichi Chōza—because I was already suspecting that my twin brother was Akimichi Chōji. Which turned out to be fact, because he was there in the crib, and here I was, just existing as his twin sister that was totally not canon!

How the fuck did reincarnation bring me into the world of Naruto?! How?! Also, WHY?! I'm in a fucking world full of trained assassins—I don't want this!
I don't want this. I don't want this.

I DON'T WANT THIS.

IDONTWANTTHIS.

Whatever chance I had at a normal life just went out the window because fucking ninjas! Ninjas that weren't supposed to exist like this—but they do. I'm part of this world now, as someone from the Akimichi clan…and considering that I'm Chōji's twin sister, that means I'm part of Naruto's generation and oh god, the Fourth Shinobi World War is in my future!

I don't want to die again—I just got here!

With the sudden rush of various emotions that I was physically too young to handle all at once, it wasn't that surprising that I started crying—and even if that wasn't the case, I have every right to start crying! Because reincarnation is a bitch and I want my old life back!

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, to be honest, if I ever die young, I have a feeling it would have been because of the stairs. I’ve been warned about those stairs, which is why I have avoided ever running up or down them. Still, the fact that I have classes on the lower level of my university’s library means it’s either taking the elevator or stairs, and me not wanting to wait for the elevator, I take the stairs more often than I’d like.

Moving on, in case you’re wondering why I went with the Akimichi clan, there happen to be various reasons that I will not say now, except…give some love to them. They’re one of the Four Noble Clans of Konoha, and I really do like the Akimichi clan. And when you’re a poor, struggling college student, food tends to be one of your biggest priorities after you are SURE you don’t need your money for anything else or free food is what you REALLY go to meetings for. This is part of the main reason why I picked the Akimichi clan for this SI OC fic. Plus…butterflies. Yeah, I’ll get into that in the next chapter.

So I’m pretty sure a lot of my usual readers are pissed at me for starting a new story, well, I kinda need another break fic, in which I actually DO pay attention to my grammar and crap. I kinda need something to keep me writing so my skills don’t decay when I update after a long break. Basically, this fic is to keep me writing when I’m not updating. I’m really tired of coming back after a short hiatus and my writing skills showing that it HAS been a while since I last updated…so please do excuse the sudden publishing of a new fic!

Well, I hope you guys enjoyed this fic. I WILL try to avoid usual clichés of SI OC fics, and I do have ways of doing such, so if you find this fic interesting, then I hope you guys decide to stick with this story from start to finish (whenever the hell that will ever be, I WILL try to finish this fic). So until next time, readers!
I certainly did a lot of crying after I realized the reality of my situation…of course, that's always been rather normal for me since I was born. Nothing new, but it was just worth noting that any time it came to my attention that I was royally fucked because I was in the world of *Naruto*, I cried even harder until I passed out.

So I tried not to think about that as often and just focused on the present. I still ended up crying more than Chōji did because I was hungry quite often and hunger, as a baby, does *not* feel good (nor has it ever felt good, it just feels *worse* as a baby). Never did really understand why I was hungry a lot, but hey, the plus side of being born into the Akimichi clan meant that I don't have to worry about my weight!

*I'm gonna have so much fun literally throwing my weight around in a fight!*

I mean, the Akimichi clan specializes in converting calories to chakra and, if not calories, then excess fat. So packing a lot of weight would be good in the long run, which I'm quite fine with because I don't mind being overweight for a second time in this life.

Ha, I remember in my past life, my weight became a subject my family talked about after I entered college. Because let me tell you about that freshman fifteen—it *exists*! And I'm just glad to be away from the hell that is college—even the circumstances regarding that aren't the best…

Though, *I am* still pissed off at the fact that I'm in a world full of fucking ninjas. I'm gonna die young because of this. Die…oh *crap*. I forgot how many other people are gonna die and this is sad because—people *die*! As obvious as it sounds, it's freaking true!

This sucks even *more* because I never got to *Shippuden* in the manga, so I'm pretty much clueless as to what happens in the future. The farthest I've gotten was when Tsunade appeared into the frame and Naruto learning how to use the Rasengan. After that, I only know bits and pieces of information that involve the death of certain characters and plot twists…lots of plot twists (and a lot of surfing on the *Naruto* wiki). Of course, it's not as useful as it sounds when you haven't a crap of an idea about the details, when all you have are summaries and brief descriptions.

In terms of the anime, I started from *Shippuden* and reached a certain point from there on, but everything prior to *Shippuden* is a blank filled with only humor I got from *Naruto the Abridged series*. I have a feeling I'm gonna be making references at this rate. It's gonna be my only source of entertainment to make my existence in this world bearable.

At least I have a twin so being a baby isn't *that* bad. I mean, don't get me wrong—being able to sleep and eat is fun and all (diapers, on the other hand, are *not* fun), but being a baby is boring as fuck. And that, paired up with ADHD, just makes things even *worse*.

At least, *I think* I still have my ADHD…I'm not exactly sure, but I do tend to get restless a lot and my attention span is extremely short, though that could be because I'm a baby…I'm gonna keep an eye out for any symptoms so I can clarify that.

Well, in any case, Chōji at least makes everything less boring for me. I like Chōji…
I think I may have adjusted too quickly to the fact that I was born into the *Naruto* world. Like, holy *shit*, why am I so calm?! **Why** am I not worried?! Is it because I just stopped thinking about the future?

Probably—I've started noticing I get headaches when I think too much about the future. I get an information overload of some sort that just hurts and makes me want to cry because I experience *waaay* too many emotions at once. So I don't think about stuff for too long.

Though, apart from that, there's also the fact that I'm a baby with the mind of a nineteen-year-old college (actually university, but same difference) girl who still only had a few weeks before winter break… With the stressors and responsibilities from that life out of the way, being a baby isn't THAT bad.

I mean, I don't have to worry about classes anymore or money being a problem—because that was a thing and I NEEDED financial aid…because college is fucking expensive. I was rather lucky I didn't take up any loans my first year, even more so my second year because I didn't get a scholarship and, unlike the year before, I actually got financial aid and had leftover grant money…of which a good portion of it was spent on textbooks (fuck you, textbooks!). Even so, the question of how long that was going to last still was a main concern for me.

So, again, with all of those issues out of the way, due to me dying, and being reincarnated into another world as a baby…I don't really mind my current circumstances.

I'm part of the Akimichi clan, when it could have been worse. Like—I could have been born as Maito Gai's daughter. God knows I would have cried if THAT happened to me (I don't think I can handle being around a man full of so much energy for long periods of time—I'll *die*).

Actually, I think it would have been even worse if I was born in the Hyuuga clan, never mind which part of the clan—actually, I'm taking that into account, now. Still, Main House or not, being a Hyuuga would SUCK.

Of course, then there's the Uchiha clan—yeah, that's still a thing…Probably the second worst clan to be born into after the Hyuuga clan because of the whole Uchiha clan massacre. I would've been killed before I even had a chance to live out my second chance at life, because thank you Itachi! And yes, I know the reasons behind it, but still! I love life…and even if he DIDN'T kill me, it's just…I'd rather AVOID that situation. BAD TIMES.

And don't get me started on the possible timelines to be born in…Being Chôji's twin sister at least gave me an idea where I am in the timeline, so that's certainly relieving. Kinda funny how close my birthday in my past life was to Chôji's. I mean, it's off by literally twenty-four hours. I'm actually quite happy about that. The emerald is still my birthstone and I'm still a Taurus! It's the little things that make me happy…

So apart from the constant crying, I was a happy baby because, again, I *love* being alive! Because I AM alive! I am very much alive…and I intend to stay that way. Just…being alive is a feeling you learn to appreciate after being reborn. I am okay with this. I will learn to deal with the future some other time after I at least get a chance to enjoy my second chance at life.

In other words, I am procrastinating the events to come. I'm not going to lie, I had a bad habit of procrastinating in my past life and it will most likely be just as bad in this life. Of course, I have a
feeling that will eventually come to an end at some point, so I best enjoy procrastinating while I can.

_Ahahhaa, I'm so screwed!_

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When Chōji and I were five months old, it happened.

I was just sleeping at the time when something that felt so wrong woke me up. It was overwhelming, it was terrifying, it was downright malevolent, and so full of hatred. I never liked being in a situation full of negativity and being unable to escape from it was suffocating. I had once thought I knew what true evil was...then I _felt_ it. It felt like I was being choked every time I breathed.

It was like I was having an asthma attack and an anxiety attack at the same time...

_Oh god, someone help me!_

I was screaming, as was Chōji. We were just so scared...I thought it would never end. Even as our mother, Ageha, tried her best to comfort us, our screams would not stop. It was something I truly _never_ wish to experience ever again...

_What the hell is going on?!_

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I later learned, via listening, that the Kyuubi attacked. While I couldn't understand anything, just hearing "Kyuubi" alone was enough for me to know what had happened (and what the cause of that horrifying night was). Whatever scrap of information I had on the tragedies that had occurred on that day popped up in my mind with such a vengeance, because, despite me being practically the shittiest excuse of a Naruto fan, I still knew what happened...and I cried.

I cried because there was not a damn thing I could have done to prevent anything that had happened on that day. Because I was only a five-month-old infant and it really sucked how small, weak, and helpless I was.

And it was just as frustrating to know that I was going to have to cope with a lot of things that came my way, because there's not a damn thing I can do about it—not now, at least...but until I CAN do something—wait. What exactly CAN I do?

And will there be consequences?

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Apparently, I have a lot of thinking to do before I can TRY to do ANYTHING. Maybe I should just focus on living...yeah, that's a good plan. It's perfect! It's...gonna be difficult because I was born in the Akimichi clan. Chances are, I'm gonna be training to become a ninja the minute I am capable of doing such.

_Curse you, shinobi life!_

Let's see what the estimate of when that'll be...well, crap. I have no idea what age children are when
they enter the Academy. Fuuuuck—I'm just gonna wing it. Focus on crawling, then walking and, for the love of god, when I can walk, focus on potty training because this diaper life is fucking mortifying.

That sounds like a plan! Wait, what was I talking about…?

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Eh, I'll get to it when I get to it. Don't babies start usually saying stuff by the time they're six months old? Huh, I'm almost six months old… I wonder what my first word will be, because I haven't a thought as to WHAT to say since I can't speak Japanese…yet!

If there's one thing I learned, the younger you are, the faster you learn and I'm gonna take advantage of that the minute the opportunity comes by. Though, I should avoid making myself look like a prodigy because the last thing I need is unwanted attention.

’Course, knowing me, I'll probably end up getting unwanted attention because irony absolutely adores me! I mean, just look at the way I died!

Falling down the stairs because I tripped on my untied shoelaces…something that never once happened before and the first time it did, was also the time I died. As if that wasn't enough, I also died days before the final Naruto chapter came out and if that also wasn't enough, then it was at least a month before the final Naruto movie came out.

Not like any of that would have made a difference in my current situation as, instead of catching up to the Naruto manga as I originally planned on doing when I heard the series was coming to an end, I decided that Jojo's Bizarre Adventure was much more important than that. Be it, I had been planning for quite a long time to start reading Jojo's Bizarre Adventure and it was only until I got out for the summer after my first year of college that I started actually reading the manga, after years of procrastination. Despite that, the fact still stands that my decision to prioritize Stands over Ninjas ended up screwing my chances of gaining knowledge that could have proved useful in my current situation.

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…I'm never gonna let myself hear the end of this, am I? This is definitely going to be a fun life and by fun, I mean traumatizing. I best make the most of it by enjoying the little moments and I just realized how distracted I still get, so I guess my ADHD has followed me into this life… I'm still keeping an eye out for any symptoms because you can never be too sure.

What are the chances that reincarnation ended up recycling my brain in some way? Is that even a possibility? Knowing my luck, that's probably my case or I'm an exception. Whatever it is, it doesn't change the fact that I'm irony's bitch.

C'est la vie.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa, what’s this? Another chapter? Holy shit, two updates within a day! Haven’t had THAT happen in a while… anyways, I always wondered if reincarnation would recycle your brain, especially if you keep your memories of your past life. I mean, if there’s one
thing college psychology has taught me, it’s that the brain does a CRAP ton of things… and don’t get me started on the different parts of the brain! And before I forget, did you know there are three subtypes of ADHD? If you didn’t, then let me tell you guys what they are. The three subtypes of ADHD are: Predominantly hyperactive-impulsive, Predominantly inattentive (this is ADD, which, since 1994, has been changed formally to predominantly inattentive in the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition), and Combined hyperactive-impulsive and inattentive, which is what I have, in case you guys didn’t know.

And since this is a SI OC, that means Chōko also has ADHD! Yeah…I wonder if that amps up the difficulty for the shinobi life…well, we’ll find out. And YES, I decided to start reading Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure instead of catching up to Naruto! Like, I’m nearly done with part 3 of Jojo, but I STILL haven’t gotten any farther in the Naruto manga! Because I decided that reading about Stands and music references were MUCH more important than ninjas! And look where THAT got Chōko!

So basically, for an SI OC fic, Chōko is by far the worst person to be given the job at possibly changing events…even more so because Chōko is crap at planning ahead of time, because she’ll cross that bridge when she gets to it. Still doesn’t mean she won’t try. Whether or not she’ll be successful is the question that will eventually be answered. Anyways, irony is gonna be one of the main themes about this fic, both in a humorous perspective and serious perspective. And, out of all the possible clans to be born into, I’d considered the Akimichi clan one of the safest clans ever. Also, just to clarify things, Chōko ended up dying like a few days before the last Naruto chapter came out, which would be on November 10th… And YES, if I actually decided to catch up on ANYTHING before THEN, it would STILL be Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure, because I’m almost done with part 3 and I want to get to part 4 because there is a Stand named Killer Queen. What is my life?

So I hoped you enjoyed Chōko’s misery, because I certainly seem to enjoy it from a humorous perspective…I’m such a sadist. It’s the way I work sometimes…also, happy Halloween! Hope you guys get a LOT of candy today! Until next time, readers!
The first word to come out of my mouth was, "Eat!"

Not mom…not dad…but EAT.

I know, I know...how original. But fuck it—I count it as progress! Although if you want to get into the specifics, since this is pretty much my first step into learning Japanese, the actual word I babbled out was taberu...and hoo boy, did my pronunciation need a lot of work!

I still said something, so that has to fucking count for something!

Hunger does a lot to a person and I was one hungry little baby that felt the need to let that be known. At the very least I wasn't like a certain singing plant named after a blonde needed to be fed. Of course, the way I yelled it out to Ageha and Chōza made them burst into laughter, because I caught them off guard (and again, my shitty pronunciation of a Japanese word). They weren't expecting that —I wasn't expecting that, but I was freaking hungry!

Sometimes, I surprise myself…then Chōji's first word turned out to be "Food!" and I wasn't that surprised anymore. Though, I AM surprised his first word wasn't, "Eat!" like me, since that's all I ever said and I did NOT shut up until I was fed. Though, considering how much I said that word…I ate a lot. Chōji ate a lot. We both ate a lot…and we were happy about it.

Then I began teething and everything went downhill after that because it was the worst experience ever. It aches…it freaking itches—and it HURTS. The annoying growth of my wisdom teeth was nothing compared to the fact that I have a bunch of teeth emerging from my gums.

I chewed on everything I could get my hands on, effectively ruining a small number of toys that belonged to me. I was glad when it was all over, or at least, the pain and the freaking itch. However, if there was one thing I'd like to say about the entire experience, it's that Chōji sucks…because he went through teething without too much trouble.

What happened to suffering together?!

By the time Chōji and I turned one, we were already walking and talking a whole lot more. I didn't have many notable memories as a one-year-old that DIDN'T consist of me getting into everything and walking up to everyone for the sake of food. As I've said before, I was one hungry baby and if there was one thing I didn't like sharing, it was food. Though, I sometimes made exceptions if it was Chōji who wanted some of my food. Anyone else who asked could go take a hike.

Since I'm on the subject of Chōji, as fraternal twins, he and I appeared identical at first, but as the year went by, differences began to set the two of us apart from one another. It was subtle at first, since my hair was allowed to grow out while Chōji received periodic haircuts, but by our second birthday, there was no way to mistake Chōji and me for each other.

Here's the main reason why for this. While Chōji gained weight, I…remained relatively the same, despite the fact that I ate a lot. This was something that puzzled the whole Akimichi clan. I wasn't exactly aware of this as I never paid much attention to my appearance, but mostly at food
because **hunger**. It was only as I was eating the food that my father had given me after I had all but demanded it that I overheard someone talking about my body that I took a moment to look at myself.

I was quite thin—at least, in comparison to Chōji. He was big, while I was small…and there was something wrong with that. I ate more than Chōji ever did and I was somehow smaller than he was… Of course, I was more active than Chōji, so there's that explanation. I didn't really think too much about it after that.

Because I didn't want to consider the idea that maybe there was something wrong with me. I just don't.

It was only when I turned three years old that it became an issue. The only fat I had was baby fat and that was it. I couldn't gain any weight and even if I did, it wasn't much. I still ate a lot and I don't think I was going to stop this habit anytime soon because I was hungry quite often. I wasn't sick and I seemed healthy enough, but my parents were worried.

One trip to the hospital later and nothing too much out of the ordinary was pointed out. I was healthy, which was good, but I had a fast metabolism. I burned more calories at rest, which made gaining weight difficult. With that pointed out, my weight was now under constant supervision, as there was now effort to be put into keeping it at a healthy level (what the fuck is this shit?!).

From needing to lose weight in my past life, to having to gain weight in this one is something I found annoying. Because there are a lot of problems that come with being underweight—a potential problem that now exists for me, in **this life**, thanks to my fast metabolism. Whoever said having a fast metabolism was a blessing has no idea about the troubles of gaining weight…because as far as I know, being part of the Akimichi clan meant gaining weight was a necessity.

An Akimichi with a fast metabolism…it was unheard of, but it existed. And guess who ended up being the center of unwanted attention because of that? Yo.

The irony of the situation was practically *unbearable*. The one fucking time it was actually okay for me to gain weight (and I was totally fine with that), *this* happens. And if that wasn't enough, in my past life, I knew at least four people who had fast metabolisms. As I said before, irony just absolutely adores me!

I don't even think this is how fast metabolisms are supposed to work, which is probably *why* everyone looked so damn confused (and possibly, concerned). Even I was confused because like…I wasn't expecting this—I *really* wasn't expecting this.

> _Just what kind of hand was I dealt?!_

Well, if there's one good thing about being born into the Akimichi clan, it's that I don't have to worry about food, ahhahaha…

Of course, it's still pretty damn difficult coping with a fast metabolism now that Chōji and I have started training with our father. The training was meant to help us adjust to what we were eventually going to be experiencing at the Academy—and yes, fast metabolism or not, I was *still* going to live the shinobi life because our parents believe in equal opportunity.

I should be happy about this, but the fact that training involved *running* just made me hate the fact that I was going to be doing a LOT of that as a ninja. Once again, let's think on the bright side, Chōko…it could be worse. Chōza could be Maito Gai and I doubt Maito Gai knows the limits of a three-year-old girl.
Yup…I’m still not happy about running, especially since my fast metabolism isn’t really helping. Hunger does not, I repeat, does NOT feel good… Food is definitely going to be my biggest concerns, isn’t it? Goddammit, as if I didn’t have enough of that as a college student…

Chapter End Notes

Another short chapter, but eh, decided this chapter was the best chapter to explain the theme of irony this story has. So let’s talk about Chôko’s fast metabolism…were she in any other clan, it wouldn’t be that much of a problem…but she was born into the Akimichi clan, a clan capable of converting calories into chakra, so Chôko is effectively SOL in this situation. That doesn’t mean she’s not out of the run to become a ninja. In fact, the only thing that fast metabolism will do to her is just exempt her from learning any of the Akimichi clan’s techniques since, while she might have the high chakra reserves needed to use the techniques, she’ll have trouble maintaining her current calories AND the calories needed to be converted into chakra, should she need to do so. So it’s a pretty risky situation for Chôko.

So she’ll be able to convert calories into chakra…as a last resort. But yeah, moving on from that, this is pretty much the path I wanted to take with Chôko. I mean, I COULD go the normal Akimichi way…or I could effectively fuck everything up for Chôko for the sake of implementing a hard mode difficulty on her. As you can see, I have made my decision.

And if you’re wondering about that last comment about being a college student, as a college student, you learn quite quickly that food does become an issue. This is why whenever there are any meetings and free food happens to be mentioned, you can guarantee that people WILL show up. It’s also guaranteed that whenever there is leftover food that is given out for free, like free pizza, it WILL disappear within minutes. We’re just that hungry…ahaha.

So yeah, I do in fact know at least four people with fast metabolisms and they are my friends. One of them, I have known for the longest, has always been telling me how hard it was for her to gain weight. She eats a lot, but she just doesn’t seem to gain weight. When she actually DOES gain weight, she’s pretty happy about it. I think she finally made it over a hundred pounds? I think she has…I’m not too sure. I haven’t talked to my friend in a while, what with school getting in the way. Anyways, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! This is it for now, so until next time readers!
Shikamaru

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Another year went by and Chōji and I were now four years old. Chōji was still putting on weight while I, on the other hand, wasn't, but I was eating a lot more than I did last year. Mother had started increasing my portions of food and even started teaching me about what exactly was edible outside of home… Because it turns out Mama has a bunch of survival skills and knowledge that are definitely quite useful to my predicament.

*Mama got skills!*

Why, I never bothered asking because something told me that I didn't want to know. That—and I keep forgetting to fucking ask because I have the shittiest memory ever.

*Welcome to the ADHD life—we have auditory processing disorders, rejection sensitive dysphoria, and god help you if your comorbidities include anxiety and depression.*

There wasn't a lot of room for me to be a picky eater, due to my fast metabolism. It was because of this that I even managed to get past my hatred of raw onions. Seriously, the things I do when I'm hungry—which is practically all the time. I even resorted to snatching Chōji's potato chips, which he shares with me, regardless of whether he wants to or not. It's when I eat the last potato chip when he actually gives a damn.

*I'm starting to wonder if part of the reason I'm eating so much is because of boredom...*

I honestly wouldn't be surprised, since not much has been happening and I'm still adjusting to a life without internet and videogames.

*It's like that one time I went off the grid for an extra credit assignment—except there is no deadline and I'm not getting anything out of it.*

Chōza had Chōji and me running a lot during this past year, so my speed improved while Chōji was still slow as ever. This was likely the effect our difference in build had on us (I'm not actually sure because physical fitness is not my area of expertise). Of course, the only reason my speed even improved was because I worked for it. The faster I finished my laps, the sooner I could sit down and eat (and stop running). Once again, the things I do when I'm hungry…and hate running.

*Killing two birds with one stone!*

Seriously, I *hate* this fast metabolism. I'm always hungry and sometimes, I end up scavenging around the area for anything edible, like roots—and YES, I eat roots. AGAIN, the things I do when I'm hungry. More often than not, I'm usually seen with something edible in my possession. It's a wonder I haven't resorted to actually stealing food—then again, that'd get me in trouble and I'd rather stay out of trouble. I get enough unwanted attention as is being the only member of the Akimichi clan without a heavyset build. One of these things is not like the other…and that just so happens to be me!

I don't even get picked on as much as Chōji because people keep forgetting I'm part of the Akimichi clan! Not that I don't mind not being picked on—I've had my fair share of bullying already and I prefer to keep it that way for the rest of this life. Still, I'd prefer it if people—mostly children—didn't badmouth my clan and insult Chōji right in front of my *face*! If I weren't so damn worried about
getting in trouble with Father, I'd beat up anyone who badmouthed my clan and picked on Chōji. Of course, that would be bad, as I've inherited the Akimichi clan's physical strength, which means I REALLY gotta watch my strength, or else stuff will break…like sliding doors.

Let me tell you about accidentally breaking sliding doors—IT'S EMBARRASSING. One moment, you're just going to open a door and all of a sudden—BAM! There goes the rest of your evening just watching one of your relatives fix the door while you continue apologizing like there's no tomorrow.

"It's okay, Chōko-chan—it happens."

"I am SO sorry!"

Though, I guess there ARE some good things I can at least be happy about that don't involve my fast metabolism and people badmouthing my clan. One of those things is that parents are willing to let their children roam Konohagakure on their own—most likely due to the amount of shinobi guarding the village. Hey, I enjoy my sweet freedom after a day's worth of training.

Sweet, sweet freedom…

On the rare occasions when I'm NOT eating, I'm usually either playing games with Chōji and a group of children, who have been tolerable so far, or just sitting around, watching them play. I usually resort to the latter when there are an uneven number of children and the game requires us to split into teams. Rather than let everyone fight over who has to sit out, I do so voluntarily just so the game can get started…because I know those kids would want Chōji to sit out.

They haven't said anything yet, but I know they will eventually…because this is how Chōji and Shikamaru became friends. I'm still waiting for him, by the way.

Where the hell is he anyways?

…

Oh right, he's lazy as fuck…Is he even out here?! Or is he at home, being even MORE of a sloth than he is outside of home? Heh, sloths…sloths are cute. They're even cuter when they're just babies—and I'm getting distracted.

Growl.

Welp, looks like my stomach is growling again. I guess I better go find a comfortable spot to eat my snacks, then.

"You can't play ninja with us!" WHO THE FUCK SAID THAT?!

I quickly turned my attention to a boy with blocky purple tattoos on his cheek. I don't exactly know his name—hell, I haven't even bothered to learn any of these kids' names! I remember faces first before names, so I'm only limited to learning a few names at a time—and that's if I'm lucky!

To be honest, I don't want to know any of these guys' names...

"Why can't I play ninja?" I heard Chōji ask.

"'Cuz whichever team that's got you will definitely lose!" was the boy's response. "You're so slow!"

Must. Resist. Urge to maim…
"But we got odd numbers…Even games like shōgi are only fun when we play with equal numbers of pieces."

I had to suppress a squeal when I saw Shikamaru defending Chōji. I mean—who the hell actually happened!

*What the hell took you so long, ya baby sloth?*

I was worried that I was going to have to go find Shikamaru myself and physically drag his lazy ass to Chōji. To hell with waiting—my brother needs a friend who isn't me!

"Having useless pieces is just as good as having none at all!" the boy with the blocky purple tattoos retorted.

"You know, it's not nice to talk about yourself like that." I wasn't even thinking when I said that.

*Shit!*

"Chōko!" Chōji looked sternly at me.

"S-Sorry…" I seriously did not mean to say that…

"What'd you say, skinny bitch?!" Great, now I pissed off that boy—SKINNY BITCH?!

*Oh, hell no.*

…

If it hadn't been for Chōji, I would have gotten into a fight with that boy. I was pissed off, but at the same time, I was also happy that Chōji intervened when he did. I need to learn to control my anger… pfft, so much for those anger management classes I took in my past life. Then again, I've always been impulsive…still rather glad I have Chōji this time around.

I don't know where Shikamaru is, but at the current moment, Chōji and I were spending some quality time with Dad. He's always willing to listen to us.

"And they said that the Akimichi clan has only dumb fatasses…" Chōji recounted the insults aimed at our clan. "Everyone says that…"

"Hmm…" Chōza listened intently. "I see…"

"They also called me a skinny bitch…" I said before stuffing a handful of potato chips into my mouth. "I'm not *that* skinny, am I?"

"You're fine, Chōko," Chōza said softly as he ruffled my hair.

Chōza is the best father someone like me could ever have and I am extremely happy about that. It's just that I don't appreciate the freaking irony I'm experiencing. In my past life, excluding my family, no one ever picked on me for being overweight and the only reason my family even picked on me in the first place was as an incentive to fix it because health reasons that involved my mother being diabetic and the issue of it potentially being genetic. Be it, they weren't exactly picking on me, it's more that they wouldn't get off my case because I wasn't exactly living a healthy lifestyle and they had reasonable concerns. Regardless, I never let it get to me.

In my current life as Akimichi Chōko, the **one** time I get picked on is because I don't have the typical
Akimichi build, it actually gets to me to a certain extent...I just hate this stupid irony.

*I hate it, I hate it, I hate it!*

I think I might have spaced out after that because the next thing I knew, Shikamaru showed up and both he and Chōji were getting along quite nicely, if I do say so myself...

"This is my sister," Chōji suddenly said as he gestured at me.

I blinked once, then twice before I realized that Shikamaru was looking at me. "Uh...Chōko—I'm Chōko..."

Shikamaru nodded. "In case you weren't paying attention, I'm Nara Shikamaru."

"O-Okay..." Fuuuck, I forgot how awkward I was at talking to people I have only just met when I wasn't yelling at them for making fun of my clan... I felt my face heat up as I held out my bag of potato chips to Shikamaru and asked, "C-Chip?"

... Despite my lacking social skills, I managed to make friends with Shikamaru that day. I wasn't that close to him as Chōji was, but I at least felt comfortable around Shikamaru instead of shy and awkward as I had been when I first met him. So I considered Shikamaru a close friend after that... I'm not sure how he felt about me, because I'm pretty sure he considers just about everything "troublesome" and I can be annoying, but Chōji says Shikamaru doesn't find me annoying, so I'm fine knowing that...

So now that Chōji and Shikamaru were best friends for life, that meant I was back to waiting for something to happen. That something happened to be the Academy and I think they start accepting children once they were six years old? I have no fucking idea, but if that was the case, I had like two years to wait until then...

The Akimichi clan still does in fact believe in equal opportunity, so I already know I was going to be signed up for the Academy. Even if I couldn't use chakra (in the way it needed to be use for ninjutsu and genjutsu), they still had faith in my abilities. I mean, I'm physically strong (and accidentally breaking the occasional sliding door) and fast...and I could probably learn things over time that could compensate for my inability to use chakra, so there's that. I could be like Rock Lee 2.0...minus having Maito Gai as a sensei and having strong eyebrow game.

Speaking of chakra, I actually have no idea if I can or cannot use it. I mean, I don't feel anything out of the usual, and isn't chakra supposed to be a form of life energy that all individuals produce to some degree and require to survive?

Going by that logic, that meant I should also have chakra flowing through my body...so why aren't I feeling anything? Or maybe you can only feel chakra once you start using it or only when you're using it...?

... Ugh, I'm gonna have to wait until they start teaching me how to use it to find out about that, aren't I? I just hope it doesn't hurt. Please, for the love of god, do NOT let using chakra hurt...
A few months before Chōji and I turned five years old, Chōza decided to teach us how to use chakra and the question of whether or not I could use it was finally answered: I can. And it didn't hurt—in fact, it kinda felt like petting a kitten…warm and soft, in that sense. It was a nice feeling—oh, and apparently, you can only feel chakra when you use it, so that explains why I haven't felt anything at all. I'm learning a lot of new things and I am totally okay with that.

I also learned that the minimum age to enter the Academy was five or turning five within the end of the year, meaning it was only a matter of time before Chōji and I entered the Academy. That probably explained why Chōza decided to start teaching Chōji and I how to use chakra…I have a feeling we're gonna be part of the group that is ahead of our class…

I hope I'm in the same class as Chōji and Shikamaru, if only because I am extremely afraid of being in a class full of strangers. I just feel more comfortable when I'm in a learning environment with friends. It just makes it easier on me…

Wait a second, I'm a girl…don't I have to take kunoichi classes…?

…

…

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

If you're wondering why Chōko reacted the way she did to taking kunoichi classes, it's because that means she has to be in a class full of girls she does not know…alone. Chōko is shy and awkward around people she doesn’t know. It takes her time before she can act in her usual manner, so until she actually feels comfortable, she is like a completely different person. Yelling at people and actually socializing with them are two different things. And the reason Chōko was even able to play with the other kids is because, think of it this way…you know how you are sometimes assigned to work with others in a group project and you have to put up with it? It's like that with Chōko. Chōko has literally been putting up with the kids, waiting patiently for the day that Shikamaru would stand up for Chōji when the other kids wouldn’t let him play. Chōko can put up with people…socializing, on the other hand, is difficult for her, even more so, when she is prone to saying things on an impulse. Part of that impulse comes from the ADHD, which can in fact have an effect on people’s social skills. As I have ADHD, I take the time to learn more about it and this is what I ended up finding out: People with ADHD more often have difficulties with social skills, such as social interaction and forming and maintaining friendships. This is true for all subtypes. People with ADHD have attention deficits, which cause difficulty processing verbal and nonverbal language, which can negatively affect social interaction. They also may drift off during conversations, and miss social cues. I can basically confirm this fact with my own experience (keep in mind, it could be different for other people with ADHD, everyone is different). What does this mean? It means Chōko is anything BUT a social butterfly (ahahaa, look at the irony there) because of that experience. This WILL have an effect on the story. Also, fair warning to everyone: I take ADHD VERY seriously. Just putting that up there since I had a very bad experience with a reviewer who basically assumed
everyone with ADHD was the same and just…it’s a touchy subject. It involves someone who used information off people they knew with ADHD and using it as a basis for another’s ADHD experience, which is something you should NEVER do, as that is something psychology would label as a case study and case studies are NOT representative. Normally, I would excuse something like that, but the reviewer had a pretty condescending tone, and that wasn’t nice. There’s a difference between making an honest mistake and being a jerk. That being said, I hope everyone understands that everyone is different…and that Chōko is not a completely accurate example of someone with a fast metabolism.

So seeing as this A/N has been going long enough, I’ll stop for now. I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! I’ll try to prioritize in making longer chapters, but I can’t make promises! So until next time, readers!
Butterfly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Academy usually begins accepting new students in the spring. It’s a little weird, if only because I am *waaaay* too used to starting school in the late summer or fall. Of course, I should have probably expected this, due to the way the education system worked in Japan…that being the school year beginning in spring (April) and ending in spring (March). I wonder if the Academy lets students out for summer vacation…tch, doubt it. I’d consider that sort of thing exclusive to civilians, and if that is the case, then *lucky* them. I’m only speculating, of course…but it does seem pretty likely for that to happen.

Anyways, the first day of school (as I like to call it) consisted of an introduction ceremony (orientation, most likely) and then the assigning of students to classes. Since my surname began with the letter A (for *awesome*), I was quick to find out that I was, in fact, in the same class as Chōji, which assured me that Shikamaru would be there. So I’m pretty fucking hyped, if a bit scared that my existence in general might cause some sort of deviation (I’ve been screaming on the inside since I heard Naruto’s name and *refuse* to look in his direction at all, whatsoever). I mean, nothing much really changed, as everything was going according to continuity (*so far*), but I was still worried about that changing…

By the way, textbooks—I didn’t like them in my previous life, and I still don't like them as Akimichi Chōko (I don't think I ever will). At least I didn't have to buy them (that would fucking *suck*)… Man, I really missed having free textbooks, even though they can be pretty effing heavy to carry. And I know I should be listening to Iruka-sensei as he’s explaining the rules, but the contents of this textbook are just *so* intriguing…

If only my vision wasn’t so shitty (that *better* be a phase), maybe I could actually read it better without having to hold it so far away from my face…

"Chōko, pay attention," Chōji said.

I made a face as I closed my textbook and set it down on the desk. I focused my attention on Iruka-sensei afterwards…but not before slapping Shikamaru on the back of the head, effectively waking him up from his nap. Shikamaru lifted his head to look at me, annoyance visible on his expression. I grinned widely out of sheer amusement to the point my cheeks started to hurt (it was so very hard *not* to laugh). Chōji just hoped we didn’t get in any trouble as he tried to keep us from getting into any fights (I don't think that’s even possible, with Shikamaru being such a baby sloth).

We didn't get into any trouble (or any fights, for that matter).

*Thankfully.*

I don't think this world is ready for my past life's childhood antics. Of which will *stay* a thing of the past. No one needs a troublemaker who cuts through window screens in order to escape the house when grounded. Who throws tantrums when things don't go her way and yells, because her temper is so short and she gets so *angry*.

*Don’t need any repeats of that.*

*Nope*…
Soon, it was lunchtime and I was really hyped up about that. Whenever food is involved, I just get so excited! I mean, it's annoying being hungry a good majority of the time (though I'm starting to suspect that part of the reason is boredom), and Mama's food is really good. She also doesn't go easy on the portions either, so that's a huge plus for me!

So I am a very happy child!

So, so happy~!

…and then I saw Naruto on his own—just watching groups of children socializing with each other as they ate their lunches. It was so strange.

So very, very strange...

It's one thing looking at this child, from so far away, so clearly (I can see him). With blond hair that reminded me of the sun (so bright and distinct), blue eyes that just longed for something not exactly tangible (I know that look), and ochre skin that just seemed so warm and so alive.

But's definitely another realizing that he's alive—he's actually alive. He's alive and he's real, because this is reality—this is all real. It's been real since the day I was born. And this child (this child) wasn't just someone I saw drawn on paper or in an animation—not anymore.

He was as real as any other person in this world.

Just like me.

He's my age...in my class...and so alone. So very, very alone...it hurts, just looking at him. It just hurts. He shouldn't be alone...

But he is...

Uzumaki Naruto's childhood was anything, but happy. It's why he grows into the person he is at the very start of the series. Pulling pranks to get attention—any will do, because it's better than being ignored. Wanting to be acknowledged by the village that turns its back on him, because of what he is.

But he's there—he's right there.

He's only a child.

But all they see is a monster.

I don't, though.

I don't...

My head hurts...it hurts.

It hurts it hurts it hurts.

Thinking so much about Naruto—what he is. What it means to get involved in his life—such a dangerous life that no one should have. I don't know much about that life, because my knowledge is so lacking. I just know that people will die. And one of those people could very well be myself.

But I don't wanna die.
I want to live.

I want to live so badly...but it's not going to be easy. And even though it hurts, to just look at him while he's like this (so alone, so alone), it would be better if I just left him alone. So nothing changes...so the events stay the same. So that the only thing I'd ever have to worry about, for the most part, is just staying alive. It's going to be difficult enough as is, anyways...

But are you okay with that?

Am I?

...

...

Should I really change events with the limited knowledge I have on this world?

Should I?

Ahaha, this is what happens when I don't think things through. Because I'm doing it at the very last minute, as I continue to stare at Naruto, looking exactly how he did in the manga whenever light was shed on his childhood. When he's crying, because of how alone he is.

Fuck, I see too much of myself in him and—oh, don't tell me he doesn't have his own lunch.

That's not fair!

That's not fair, it's not fair!

Not fair not fair not fair!

It's not fair...because my conscience isn't going to let me ignore the kid any longer. I just can't.

I can't.

Here's to me, digging my own grave...Whether or not I'll regret this decision...I probably won't know until it's too late. But for what it's worth—for what it's worth...

He won't be alone anymore.

...

...

Okay, Chōko, breathe—just fucking breathe and don't screw this up. Don't screw this up, don't screw this— "Why don't you have your own lunch?"

Dammit!

"H-Huh?!" Naruto seems to space out just as often as I do...maybe I can salvage this conversation! Oh god, oh god, oh god!

Fucking say something, you idiot!

He's staring at you!
"Uuuhhh…hi?" The heat that burns my face is all too familiar to me. Embarrassment has not been too kind to me as I was growing up in my past life. The many times I wanted to say something—or even ask a question—but was worried about making a complete idiot out of myself for doing that. Because I did enough of that throughout my elementary school years—my final years especially…children can be cruel and it's so hard to forget.

It's hard—so very hard…

"O-Oh, hello…" But it seems Naruto doesn't mind, as he returns my rather awkward greeting just as awkwardly.

My heart's pounding so hard, that it feels like it's going to explode at any second. My body's shaking, too. I'm just so anxious—so nervous. I don't want to mess this up, but…I wasn't exactly expecting Naruto to be just as awkward and shy as I am. This changes everything, because I was banking on Naruto to break the ice for me.

Just my luck!

Oh god, this is so painful and I definitely need to fix this, but I already find it difficult enough as is to just even talk to Naruto. Okay, Chôko, think…what is a good way to break the ice?

…

…

"F-Food?" That's all I can really say as I hold out my giant bento box for Naruto to see. I'm holding my breath and anticipating his reaction. I'm still shaking and I'm pretty sure he's noticed.

Naruto doesn't say anything, though. He doesn't really have to, because his stomach speaks for himself with an audible growl. He freezes for a moment, his face turning redder than a tomato. His eyes are wide and he swallows hard before he vigorously nods his head. "Y-Yeah…"

There we go!

I'm so relieved…at the same time, I'm terrified. I'm terrified that my actions could potentially have consequences, but I'm at least reassured by the look on Naruto's face as I share my lunch with him. I'm reassured with the idea that it's worth whatever consequences will come my way now.

He just looks so happy, that it practically hurts to see that smile directed at me. When was the last time the kid was ever happy? I can't leave him alone…I just can't.

I can't…

…

It's still jarring, to see Naruto acting so shy and awkward, when I'm so used to seeing him be such an outgoing and loud character in the anime and manga. Maybe it's because Naruto is no longer just a character, but an actual person (a child). Or maybe it has to do with the fact that I just walked up to him and offered him food… I seriously doubt anyone has ever done that to him (with the possible exception of Teuchi), so I must have caught him by surprise. Still, Naruto does seem very afraid that, at any given moment, I might leave him, from the way he keeps looking at me.

"I'm not gonna leave," I suddenly said.

"You're not?!" Oh my god, Naruto, stop making me have feels.
"Nope." I'm not changing my mind. I've reached a point of no return. I'm here to stay, so you better get used to it, buddy. "Now shut up and eat."

And on this fine, spring day, I made friends with Naruto. Believe it.

...

...

Chōji and Shikamaru didn't follow me when I walked up to Naruto. I didn't notice that until Naruto and I were nearly done eating. I was a little surprised at first, but then I remembered that it was normal for Chōji and Shikamaru to let me go on my own. If I wanted them to come along, then all I'd have to do was say something. That's just how it is.

I'm at least happy that I made friends with Naruto. Like, I actually made a friend on my own, with no help from Chōji. I think this is a great improvement for me…I feel accomplished.

I also managed to make it through what I considered to be the Academy's equivalent to physical education, which took place after lunch. I am so glad that Chōji and I've been training since we were three years old…It actually paid off!

*It paid off!*

That still doesn't mean that class wasn't exhausting…

*So this is what it means to be a student…*

And that's how my first day of school went. It certainly went better than I had expected. I managed to embarrass a bunch of parents who were glaring at Naruto when they came to pick up their children after school. You know, I really love being part of one of the Four Noble clans…it gives my question of, "Why is everyone looking at Naruto like that?" all the more impact.

*I must use this power wisely…*

But in the meantime, it sure does feel glorious to stand up for my friend! By the way, my parents were a bit surprised to find out that I befriended Naruto, but they didn't say anything. And when I told Ageha about Naruto not having his own lunch, I ended up going to school the next day with an even bigger bento box. It's nice to see how supportive Mama is of my friendship with Naruto…even more so because my father doesn't seem to mind that I've befriended Naruto.

As for Chōji, he just seems rather pleased for some reason. I don't know why, though…but I swear he was smiling when I decided to sit with Naruto instead of with him and Shikamaru. Whatever the reason is, it doesn't really matter to me, as I found a new problem with Naruto that has caught my attention.

Naruto can't read.

God. Dammit.

*How the fuck does this even happen?*

I think I know exactly how, but I'd rather not even think about it. It's depressing enough as to know that Naruto goes home alone to an empty apartment each day. I don't need any more things to plague my mind as I continue to worry about the wellbeing of my own friend.
I really have my work cut out for myself, don’t I? Well, that's friendship for ya! Urgh, at least I know what I'm doing during lunchtime…

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Teaching Naruto how to read should have been an easy task for me, but there was one issue making this an incredibly easy task: I am a shitty reader. Like, I can barely even make out what I'm reading in this freaking textbook. I'm not completely illiterate (surprisingly), but I still have issues reading. The bigger the text, the easier it is for me to make out certain shapes. But otherwise, it's just a pain in the ass trying to fucking read.

I put this down as me not knowing Japanese, as my brain is probably hardwired to read mainly English, a good amount of Spanish, and a little French. And I know that I was an avid reader in my past life, so I do find it rather ironic that I have a hard time reading as Akimichi Chōko...then again, I didn't pick up an actual interest in reading until I entered the third grade...

There’s also the fact that I’m still waiting for my vision to correct itself, like holy shit, was it really like this for me when I was this age in my past life?

_I don’t know man, I don’t know._

Of course, as the week went by and I continued trying to teach Naruto how to read during lunchtime (keyword: try), Chōji and Shikamaru eventually decided to join in on our reading lesson on the fourth day and let me just say, Shikamaru is a godsend.

As lazy as he is, Shikamaru is good at helping others…when he wants to (and this is why he's a baby sloth). Anyways, it was thanks to Shikamaru that Naruto was finally learning how to read. Meanwhile with me, I was still having issues reading. Shikamaru certainly noticed, having made many comments on the weird ways I read a book (the book is never in front of my face, but rather, as far away from it as possible). Though, it wasn't until the end of the week, that Shikamaru finally told Chōji something. I don't know what it was that Shikamaru told Chōji, but Chōji ended up talking to Chōza after that. And shortly right after, I got taken to the hospital and found out that I had hyperopia.

So to make a long story short, I was in dire need of some glasses because my shitty vision was so not a phase—holy shit, how did I ever even think that was a phase?!

_God, Chōko, you’re so stupid!_”

Honestly, this isn't even anything new. It's just freaking sad that it took me this long to realize something that should have been so obvious, because it was right in front of my fucking face…like literally. Then again, I've always been blind to what's in front of my face…

_I'm gonna die young at this rate…_

Apart from acknowledging the fact that I am in dire need of improving my sense of awareness, I am now the proud owner of a new pair of glasses that have now become part of my life as Akimichi Chōko. I picked them out myself, because at the very least, I was in control of that.

So, here I am, brown eyes now framed behind large, circular lenses. I can actually see now (holy shit, the difference is real) and I've never been better… I'm being serious, I can fucking see my own reflection now and I can read—it's a miracle!
Though, as a downside, when I got back to school the following week, I became the center of attention. The glasses really made me stand out (though, that's on me for picking these glasses specifically), but it's not that bad…at least, compared to what really sucks. Wanna know what sucks? In my past life, I never needed glasses and because of that, I was the only one in my family who didn't wear glasses…yet, my siblings and parents would add.

_Fuck you, irony!_

Ugh, I should have never made fun of my nephew's reading glasses…I only did it because he was bothering me! I regret everything…

_Except these glasses!_

But I seriously don't appreciate the number of children who keep trying to steal my glasses (god dammit, no means _no_!). Naruto was the exception, however…I mean, he asks first. Everyone else just grabs them while I'm zoning out and that's like hella rude.

_You just don't do that to people, dang it!_

Minor annoyances aside, everything was going well and I can fucking _see_ (seriously, holy shit, being able to see is such a _good_!). And then I found out kunoichi classes began that day and any shred of happiness I had suddenly went out the window when I realized I was gonna be stuck in a class full of girls I didn't know (oh god, _social interaction_). Naruto wished me luck as we parted ways. I thanked him because I was gonna need it.

_Now let's see if I can avoid getting lost._

Because god knows I get lost enough as is, without Chōji around. Like seriously, trying to get through the Academy building is like going through a fucking maze.

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The very first day of kunoichi classes brought us outside, to a vast field full of flowers. I really like flowers—I just do. That is something that won't be changing any time soon and oh gosh, there are just so many types of flowers! So many colors, types, and various scents—this is _so_ awesome!

It certainly kept my mind off the fact that I know absolutely no one in Suzume-sensei's class (personally, at least—I can see you, Hinata, Ino, and Sakura). So when Suzume-sensei sent us girls to go pick flowers, I was happy to oblige. Like, flower picking is totally my thing, even though I suck ass at flower arrangements and ikebana…

I would've gone to Ino for help (_it's so tempting_), but she was currently defending Sakura from Ami and her clique (ah, bullying—it never changes and it continues to fucking suck and be the bane of my existence). Well, even if that wasn't happening, I doubt I would have walked up to Ino. I don't have enough courage to talk to her just yet—I need time for that. Like…weeks, at the very least.

Being an introvert sure has its perks when you're socially awkward, ahahaha—oh god, I need _help_…

_At least there are also perks to being alone._

Like being able to think clearly and focus on one thing—like picking flowers! Yeah…the fuck you looking at, Ami? Wait—shit! She's coming this way—no, no, _no_!
"Hey, aren't you part of the Akimichi clan?" Why yes, Ami, isn't it obvious—Chōko, now is not the time for sarcasm. "You sure don't look like it. What are they doing? Starving you?"

Oh, fuck you! "None of your business, bitch."

*Shit.*

"What did you call me?" Ami forced a smile, her left eye twitching slightly as she glared at me.

"N-Nothing!" Dammit, Chōko, this is why you need to think before you say crap!

"L-Liar!" One of Ami's friends, Fuki, yelled before grabbing onto my hair and pulling it...*hard.*

Ow, ow, ow, *ow!* "Let go!"

*Curse this long-ass hair!*

As much as I think long hair is hella cool, this is just part of the many reasons I *hate* having long hair. The only reason I haven't cut it yet is because Mama seems to have fun brushing and combing my hair every day. Of course, there is also the fact that it gives me a sense of nostalgia when she does that, because it's what my mother did in my past life...

The only difference, however, was that in my past life, my mother struggled with me every time she brushed my hair because my hair was a curly mess that tangled easily and I cried whenever my mom accidentally pulled my hair. Then I decided to cut my hair and ever since then, I've taken to brushing my hair...I miss my past mom and the braid she put my hair in...

*Is this really a good time to be thinking on the past?*

"Ow!" My scalp—ack!

*Guess not!*

God dammit, let *go* of my hair, Fuki—Fuki, god dammit, I can *hurt* you if I wanted to! I just... "H-Hey!"

Another of Ami's friends, Kasumi, just took my glasses—that little punk! "Can't see now, can you?!"

Actually, I can, except everything close is a little blurry, but I'm not saying anything! "Give 'em back—ow!"

"If you get on your knees and say you're sorry, then I'll tell them to let go," Ami sneered at me.

*Oh hell no!*

"Go fall in a pit!" Fuck you, Ami! I have pride! Pride that will most likely get me killed one day... but pride, nonetheless!

*Famous last words!*

"Why you—!" Ami scowled. "Kasumi-chan, break her glasses!"

Hey, I just got those! "Stop!"
"Y-You're going to g-get in trouble," a soft, stuttering voice said.

Wha…is that—is that who I think it is?

Of all the things that could've happen, little Hinata trying to stop Ami and her friends from picking on me was one of those things I could have never predicted. I was honestly baffled that this little soft-spoken girl with self-esteem issues and lacking confidence could find the strength to speak out like this. Even Ami and her friends weren't expecting it. It took Ami a good minute to finally find her voice, having been rendered speechless by Hinata's sudden spike in courage.

"What do you mean?" Ami was probably aware of Hinata's status as the heiress to her clan, so she was picking her words carefully.

Clever girl…

Hinata twiddled her fingers nervously as she spoke. "A-Akimichi-san is part of the F-Four Noble Clans of K-Konoha. G-Getting in trouble w-with the Akimichi clan would be b-bad, wouldn't it?"

It seems upon realizing that messing with an Akimichi would get them in trouble, Ami and her friends decided I wasn't worth it (thank god) and immediately left. Kasumi had dropped my glasses onto the ground, which I was about to pick up, but Hinata beat me to it.

"H-Here you go, A-Akimichi-san," she said softly as she held out my glasses.

I blinked a few times and nodded as I accepted my glasses from her. "Th-Thank you…"

"I-It's n-nothing…" Hinata's face reddened as beads of sweat rolled down the sides of her face. "I j-just…couldn't stand them p-picking on you…"

"Still, thank you…" Hinata, you have earned my respect and I am forever in your debt. "Ahh…do you know how to arrange flowers?"

Hinata's face turned even redder. "Y-Yes…?"

"Can you help me?" The desperation in my voice was evident. I wasn't even trying to hide it—there was just no point.

Hinata nodded her head. "O-Okay…"

"I'm Akimichi Chōko!" I suddenly blurted out. "Just call me Chōko!"

Hinata was a little stunned from my sudden outburst (I'm not a quiet person), but she somehow managed to keep calm. It took her a moment before she finally introduced herself to me, "I-I'm Hyuuga Hinata…"

Somehow, I don't know how, I managed to make yet another friend…or rather, Hinata did. Frankly, I don't care because I like making friends, but I'm still shocked over the fact that it was because Hinata, of all people, defended me from my would-be-bullies. The Yamato Nadeshiko is strong within this girl…

..."I-I think this flower r-represents us w-well," Hinata said as she held up an amaryllis flower she had just plucked.

"Shy…" That was what I recall the meaning the amaryllis flower had. "Yeah, you're right about
that…but I also think this iris fits you best.”

Hinata's face heated up. "A-Ah, do you m-mean it?"

I smiled at Hinata. "Yes!"

I went home that day feeling like the happiest girl in the world, because I made friends with Hinata. I honestly felt proud over what she had done (so very proud for a girl I barely just talked to), but I couldn't help but feel something was off… I mean, what Hinata had done was something that can definitely be considered a deviation, but I wasn't worried about that.

What I was worried about was something else, but I couldn't put my finger on it… It was only the very next day, in which I introduced Hinata to Naruto, that I suddenly noticed that the classroom was missing a certain pink-haired girl (I saw her yesterday…where is she today?). At first, I put it down as Sakura being absent from class…then during lunchtime, I found her and Ino eating lunch together and it took me a few moments to put two and two together.

Sakura wasn't in the same class as me.

Sakura was in a different class.

Why could that be?

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I nearly threw up my lunch when I realized that I had replaced Sakura. The nausea was overwhelming and I was just so freaking horrified, because—because… Because I'm the reason that Sakura is in a different class—it's because I'm here, that she isn't. Forget about befriending Naruto—just what have I done by replacing Sakura?

What have I done?

Chapter End Notes

3-30-18 MORE EDTITS ON THE WAY BECAUSE I'M BACK!! Oh, and this fic now has a tvtropes page! So yeah, that's a thing now…please feel free to add to it.

So one thing I’ve been wanting to know is what exactly would happen if the SI OC accidentally took Sakura’s spot in class. It’s something I’ll honestly be delving into, because I’m honestly intrigued with the scenario. So yeah, it’s all thanks to Chōko that Sakura is in a different class. The thing about Chōko is this: she is literally the butterfly in the butterfly effect. My friend, ChibiFoxAI, likes to call her a symbol and Chōko might as well be one for the Butterfly Effect.

This is where I finally explain the title of this story. Chōko’s name literally means, “Butterfly child,” and if you put it in perspective to what her existence has already done, it has already done more than Chōko would have done on her own, directly. She is indirectly changing the events of the story just by existing. For the most part, I’ll be focusing on the indirect changes Chōko causes to the storyline. Not to say she won’t directly change it, but more often than not, it’s going to be an indirect cause.
Aside from replacing Sakura’s spot in class, Chōko has also befriended Hinata…or rather, it was the other way around. In the same way Chōko saw a bit of herself in Naruto, Hinata saw a bit of herself in Chōko. That’s why Hinata did what she did. Also, hyperopia is commonly known as being farsighted. Chōko is farsighted. She can’t see things at a close distance…well, she can, but not to the extent that would allow her to read well, as shown by how she is a shitty reader. Anything involving the fine details of things is blurred out to her at a close distance. Anyways, the type of glasses she wears are the same Jade Harley from Homestuck and Touko Fukawa from Danganronpa wear. If you’re wondering, those are the reasons she specifically chose that design for her glasses…yes.

For a better visual image, just think of the glasses Yakushi Kabuto and Udon wear. Yeah, thing about me is that I’m the only one in my family who doesn’t need glasses…yet (everyone in my family likes to add). So I was originally gonna keep Chōko without glasses, but then I decided to implement another element of irony for Chōko. And, to be honest, I have yet to see an SI OC who wears glasses (unless my memory is crap, which is likely) and I’d just like the chance to work with a character who wears glasses.

So basically, Chōko is now a glasses-wearing girl and if you’re wondering how she managed to go through a week without noticing that Sakura wasn’t in her class…when you have a one-tracked mind like her, you tend to miss things out until it literally slaps you in the face.

Also, in the Japanese language of flowers, an iris can mean noble heart, which is what Chōko was saying that Hinata has. And ikebana is the Japanese art of flower arrangement, in case any of you guys are wondering. By the by, while Chōko is pretty strong, what’s keeping her from fighting back, for the most part, is the chance that she could seriously hurt someone. Be it, she’s gonna eventually need to learn to get past that hesitance, but for now, Chōko’s conscience is getting the better of her. That’s how she ended up befriending Naruto.

And that’s about it for now, I don’t have much more to say except I’ll keep trying to make longer chapters. I think from this point on, you can expect longer chapters…I think. It’s not a for sure thing, but hopefully, it happens because I seriously want to start working on longer chapters. I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, so until next time, everyone!
Zinnias and Roses

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I honestly should be afraid over the fact that I have effectively replaced Sakura in this class, but I'm not. In fact, I don't even think much about the situation and— "Naruto, give me back my glasses."

"Ah, sorry Chōko-chan!" Naruto laughed sheepishly as he returned my glasses. "But you just seemed so distracted..."

Fuck, he noticed!

ABORT ABORT ABORT!

"You gotta stop doing that..." I huffed as I put my glasses back on. I was hoping to save face, but the way Naruto was looking at me made me rather nervous...

"A-Ah, Iruka-sensei is looking at us!" Hinata stuttered.

Crap! "We're paying attention!"

And that's how I made an idiot out of myself during gym class (as I'd like to call it). I haven't done that in a while...it's not a feeling I'd like to ever experience, nope (it's the worst). On the bright side, at least Hinata and Naruto are getting along as friends (the best of friends). And let me just say how awesome it is to be friends with the Hyuuga clan heiress! Now no one fucking dares to mess with Naruto!

Might be a bit too early to say that, but screw it!

Of course, ever since I made friends with Naruto, everyone else has been keeping their distance from Naruto... But with Hinata in the mix, it was now completely guaranteed that Naruto was safe. Oh man, does it feel good to be part of the Four Noble Clans of Konohagakure!

I really gotta use this power wisely...

But you wanna know what doesn't feel good? Running...running is a horrible thing that just tires you out and makes you sweaty. And the sad thing about it is that it's going to be the main form of transportation for shinobi, so I need to learn how to suck it up (I need to stop being a whiny baby).

Curse you, shinobi life!

On the bright side, thanks to Hinata, I am no longer afraid of kunoichi classes! Kunoichi classes, by the way, take place after regular classes every other day. That means that today, Hinata, Naruto, and I can spend more time together after classes! Oh man, what are we gonna do?

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I should've realized that, by the fact that I've made friends with Naruto, this day would eventually come. What day am I talking about exactly? The day Naruto would introduce me to Ichiraku Ramen. The small restaurant looked exactly as it appeared in both the anime and manga (thought it certainly appeared bigger to me, but that's because I am but a tiny four-year-old girl). And Teuchi and Ayame
are quite the lovely people (the loveliest). They seem so happy, with their wide smiles on their faces, to see that Naruto isn't alone this time around, since he brought both Hinata and I along.

"You must be the girl he keeps talking about!" Ayame looked at me with a wide smile.

*What?*

I blinked a few times before turning to at Naruto. "Talking about?"

"I guess I might have mentioned your name a few times…" Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "I was just happy someone wasn't mean to me-ttebayo!"

Oh god dammit, I am not having feels right now! Go away, tears! I do not need you right now!

"Why are you crying?" Dammit, Naruto!

"I just got something in my eye!" I exclaimed as I took off my glasses to rub away the familiar sting and moisture of tears away.

"I-It's okay to cry…" Hinata said softly as she patted me on the shoulder.

"Hinata~!" I whined. "Now they won't stop!"

It's nice to see that the emotional aspect of myself still exists in this life…god dammit.

*Are you really that surprised?*

Not really, but I would have appreciated it if I wasn't so damn emotional. Gosh dang it, now it's gonna be hard for anyone to take me seriously if I ever get so worked up!

"Hey, Teuchi-san!" Naruto exclaimed. "Can I get an extra-large serving of ramen?"

"Sure!" Teuchi was quick to respond. "What type?"

"It's not for me!" Naruto gestured at me. "It's for Chōko-chan. I'm thinking that maybe some ramen can make her stop crying. Whaddaya want, Chōko-chan?"

I am not crying—okay, maybe I am…but I wouldn't mind having some ramen. "Shio…I want shio."

"One extra-large shio ramen coming right up!" Teuchi grinned at me. "What would you like, Naruto?"

"I want miso ramen with roasted pork fillet!" Naruto was quick to respond. "Also extra-large!"

"I-I also want that…" Hinata said quietly.

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Naruto and I found out that day that Hinata was a big eater. I may have suspected it, based on a *Shippuden* omake (or whatever that ramen-eating contest can be considered) I have seen, but I didn't think it was actually canon until now. I said nothing about it, but Naruto isn't exactly the most tactful person alive.

"You sure eat a lot, Hinata-chan!" Naruto grinned widely at Hinata.

Hinata was almost done with her ramen when she heard Naruto say that. Her face turned red as she
began to stutter, "A-Aah…"

I decided to pull all attention away from Hinata. "So do you, Naruto?"

"And you!" Naruto turned his attention to me.

"That's because I have a fast metabolism!" That is part of the reason. The other reason is that I really do love to eat…and Akimichi clan food is extremely delicious, if also nutritious! Yeah, thing about the Akimichi clan is we're big on nutrition. We've managed ways to make nutrition delicious and not complete torture on the taste buds. So when an Akimichi tells you a food is nutritious, you better believe it is nutritious! Of course, we still do have a non-nutritious food, but I digress…

"Well, I'm hungry!" Naruto replied, as if it was obvious. "Aren't you supposed to eat when you're hungry?"

"Yeah, I guess I do eat when I'm hungry…" I admitted, as obvious of a remark as it was. "I guess you got me there."

"That's right-ttebayo!" Naruto grinned widely.

I was about to say something, but then Hinata's quiet laughter caught my attention.

Oh my gosh, she sounds so adorable—aaaaahhhhh!

Hinata certainly seemed to be doing better than she was when Naruto told her she ate a lot…

"Nice to see you're smiling, Hinata." Keep laughing, it's adorable!

"Eep!" Hinata immediately stopped laughing as her face turned red. "I-I'm s-sorry—"

"Don't apologize!" I will have none of that, dear friend! "It's okay to laugh…just like it's okay to cry, huh?"

"Y-You're right…" Hinata managed to calm down. "Ahh…c-can you n-not tell anyone…"

"About what?" I asked without waiting for Hinata to finish. "Oops…sorry for interrupting you…"

Hinata shook her head. "It's fine…j-just don't tell a-anyone that I…I…e-eat a lot."

I blinked a few times. "Why?"

"I don't kn-know how my f-father would r-react…" Hinata replied. "H-He would pr-probably say it's unbecoming…"

"I think it's cute," Naruto suddenly blurted out.

Hinata's blush returned with a vengeance. "H-Huh?!"

"I mean, you seem really happy when you eat," Naruto said as he rubbed the back of his head. "So I don't see what's unbecoming about it…"

"…" Hinata averted her gaze.

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Am I really witnessing what I think I'm witnessing? Because if it is, then holy hell! That was freaking adorable! I'm a sucker for cute scenes like this...I'm amazed I haven't squealed. I'm honestly surprised I didn't squeal when I heard Hinata laugh...

"Anyways, we got ya covered, Hinata!" Still, I'm a little surprised that Hinata has her own secrets...that don't involve her future crush on Naruto. Of course, I could probably say the same thing to just about everyone. "Just to let you know, when you're around me and Naruto, you can eat as much as you want...got it?"

Hinata looked at me and smiled. "Thank you..."

"I really need to take you guys out to one of the Akimichi clan restaurants!" I totally need to do that! Since Hinata and Naruto are my friends, they'll probably get the Akimichi discount, which is a very nice thing to have. Naruto would definitely benefit from this...I should probably talk it over with Chōza. He could probably put in a good word for Naruto...god knows Naruto needs that discount. "How about it?"

Naruto was smiling widely, his body shaking from joy. Hinata was happy in her own, quiet way. I was a lot more like Naruto, trembling with excitement as I grinned widely. I just felt so giddy! I know what I was doing when I got home!

"Hinata-sama!" a curt voice managed to snap me out of my good mood. "Ah!"

When Naruto, Hinata, and I turned, I saw a slightly older boy with long, black hair and eyes similar to Hinata's eyes (those eyes). It took until I noticed that his forehead was covered that I realized that this boy is Huuyga Neji. Fuuuck, I had forgotten about this guy! Shit...okay, Hinata should be four-years-old, that'd make Neji...almost six, meaning...shit. The incident has already happened, hasn't it?

Great, that means that Neji has that stick up his ass...Not gonna lie, it's nice to see that he's alive (I hope he stays alive), but I'm not gonna appreciate his currently arrogant and cold personality. This is going to be a fun seven to eight years, isn't it?

"Who's he?" Naruto asked Hinata.

Hinata looked down. "Neji-nii-sama...I-I have to go."

"See ya tomorrow, Hinata-chan!" Naruto said as Hinata scurried over to Neji's side.

"It was nice talking to you!" Let's be positive for now, Chōko! God knows we're definitely going to need to stay positive..."Bye~!"

The next day started out well enough, but around lunchtime, I noticed something was off with Hinata. She seemed happy enough to eat some of the food I was offering her from my bento box, but there was this look on her face that appeared every other moment or so when she thought we weren't looking. It was as if she wanted to tell me something, but couldn't find the courage to say it (I've been in that position so many times that at this point, I can recognize when someone else is like that).
There was a wistful look in her eyes as she looked at Naruto, who was currently having his daily reading lesson with Shikamaru, with a little help from Chōji.

It was only during today's kunoichi class that Hinata finally managed to tell me of her concerns. And what exactly were her concerns? Her father had found out about her association with Naruto and wanted her to cease being friends with the boy.

I…should have seen this coming. Actually—I might have, but that still didn't stop me from looking surprised.

"Wh-Why?!!" I blurted out—rather loudly, enough to the point that I ended up getting stared at by a few other girls. My face heated up in embarrassment, but I ignored them as I continued to look at Hinata.

Hinata focused her attention on the flower she had finished picking: a zinnia. "I-I don't know…b-but I have to listen to my f-father."

I frowned. "D-Do you really want to stop being friends with Naruto?"

"N-No!" Hinata shook her head firmly. "I don't…"

"Then what are you going to do?" I could tell Hinata wanted to keep being friends with Naruto, but her father was really making that difficult for her. Still, how the hell did Hiashi know about Naruto so fast?

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Oh, right…Neji…God dammit, Neji! Do you really feel the need to ruin Hinata's happiness? She was so happy yesterday! New goal: Make him pay…

Somehow.

"Hinata…?" I looked at Hinata, who had yet to give me an answer.

"I…I don't know…” Hinata bit her lip.

…

"Maybe you should talk it over with your father," I suggested. "I mean, if you don't want to stop being friends with Naruto, why don't you tell him that?"

Easier said than done, Chōko!

"I—how?!" That seemed to be the question Hinata wanted to know. "I don't th-think I c-can…"

"No…you can." Even though Hinata still lacked confidence and had issues with her self-esteem, I know that even she could find the courage to stand up for herself. She just had to push herself. "Remember what you did for me when Ami and her friends were picking on me."

I know you can do it.

"I s-still can't b-believe I did that…” Hinata admitted as her face lit up with a luminescent blush, her pale skin making it all the more evident. "I was r-really scared, b-but…I c-couldn't stand seeing them d-do that to you…"
"Just because you're scared doesn't mean you can't do what you feel is right." Look at me, sounding all mature and crap. Ahaha, where was this maturity when I needed it in college? Really, where was it? "Fear is normal...isn't it? It's whether or not you let it prevent you from doing anything that should matter...right?"

Hinata nodded her head, albeit, hesitantly. "I-I guess..."

"Eventually, everyone needs to learn how to stand up for themselves." That's how I felt, especially with the shinobi life being a thing. "If you can stand up for a stranger, then you should be able to stand up for yourself...right?"

At the very least, if you had to stand up for someone, even if it's just one person, and even if that person is you...it's okay.

_Really, it's okay, Hinata..._

Hinata thought for a moment. "R-Right..."

"Look...wait here a second." I got an idea.

Hinata blinked. "Huh?"

"I'll be right back!" I exclaimed as I ran off in a certain direction.

... About five minutes later, I came back running to Hinata, with a flower in my hand. In today's kunoichi class, we were supposed to find a flower that would express something to one of our classmates. It took me a while and I was almost afraid I wouldn't find it, but I found the flower I wanted to give to Hinata.

Smiling, I held out a pink rose to Hinata. "For you, Hinata!"

Hinata had nearly dropped the zinnia in her hand when she got a good look at the rose and its coloration. "A-Ah!"

"Whatever happens, just do it for yourself...okay?" I'm trusting Hinata to do what she felt was right. "Even if it's the only thing you do, it's okay..."

Hinata bit her lip as she hesitantly accepted the pink rose from me. She stared at the rose for a moment before holding out the zinnia in her other hand to me. "F-For y-you..."

"Thank you!" I said as I accepted the zinnia from Hinata. I feel...very happy. Like so happy, I feel like I'm going to cry. My eyes are starting to heat up and my chest just feels so warm and fuzzy. I managed not to cry though... "Seriously—thank you..."

_It means so much to me..._

Hinata just nodded her head as she looked down at the pink rose in her hands. "...I...haven't kn-known you f-for long..."

"Yeah..." Technically, we've only known each other for like three days, counting today...but to me, it feels longer. That's how I feel...and this zinnia in my hands is only making my feelings grow even stronger.

"B-But...I'm r-really glad..." Hinata continued as a warm smile formed on her lips. "I-I met you,
Chōko-chan…y-you…and N-Naruto-kun…"

I felt my face heating up upon hearing this. I rubbed the back of my head awkwardly as I looked at Hinata, whose face was as red as mine was (though hers was much redder, due to how pale her skin was, as opposed to my not-so-pale skin). The two of us…we might come from two different clans, with upbringings that are just as different. And yet, despite it all, we're more alike than one would think.

I think that's why we get along so well—because Hinata sees herself in me. And I do the same with her, with the way I talk to her (the feelings of regret that plague me—that make me wish it doesn't happen to someone else). It feels like such a shallow reason, but at the same time…I don't mind.

I just can't…

Even if I see myself in her, that still does nothing to take away from the fact that we're friends. Just like with Naruto…

I'm happy…

So very, very happy…

I might have had some issues with my new life, as Akimichi Chōko, but there are times, such as these, that I find myself embracing who I am. Even though I'm not who I am anymore, with a life that is now in the past, to hear things such as this—just simple words of gratitude—it just means so much. It means so much, to someone like me, because…it's coming from a friend.

I'm not alone, ahahaha…

And neither are you, Hinata…

…

…

The next day, when Hinata told me what went on the other night, I felt something swell inside me. It was a feeling that I could only identify as pride. Hinata (shy, timid Hinata) had managed to stand up for herself when she spoke to her father last night. Because of what she had done, her father has allowed her to stay friends with Naruto.

Hiashi might have believed the friendship wouldn't last, as Hinata had only known Naruto for about two days at the time…even so, he still allowed Hinata to stay with Naruto. That alone was milestone within itself, as was Hinata's reason to smile. She has every reason to smile and for that, I couldn't be any happier.

I'm so proud of you, Hinata…

We didn't tell Naruto about it… Hinata didn't want Naruto knowing that her father didn't approve of their friendship. One day, though, Hinata would tell him…at least, that's what she told me. When, is a matter for the future, for now…Hinata was happy living in the present, as she talks to the both of us, with a bright smile on her face that was as warm as the sun.

Though, all good things must come to an end (in some ways), and that happened when I found yet another problem with Naruto: He can't write. I nearly slammed my head onto my desk when I found out about that…nearly. I didn't exactly want to break my glasses. Naruto was learning how to read at a moderately fast pace. He still had a long ways to go, but he was showing a lot of progress within
the entire week he had started learning how to read. I have no idea how any of us were going to show him how to write. Even Shikamaru was still working out the kinks in his writing skills, while I'm still in the midst of learning.

So that left me with only one option… When the entire class was let out for lunch, I gave my bento box to Naruto and told him and Hinata to find a spot. I had to talk to someone…

…

"Iruka-sensei?" I'm honestly surprised I'm not that awkward around Iruka-sensei, but I guess it's because he has this vibe about himself. Still, I am slightly intimidated by this guy.

"Ah, what is it, Chōko?" Iruka-sensei eyed me questioningly.

"Well, it's about Naruto…" I said as I rubbed the back of my head.

Iruka-sensei stiffened upon hearing Naruto's name. "What about him? Has he been bothering you or anything?"

"What—no!" Dammit, Iruka-sensei! You're better than the others to not act like this! "That's not it! He can't write!"

"O-Oh…" Iruka-sensei seemed embarrassed. "Naruto can't write, huh…?"

"Uh-huh…" I nodded my head. "Shikamaru and I have been teaching Naruto how to read, and he's improving…but I have no idea how we're gonna teach him how to write since both of us are still learning…"

"So you want me to teach him how to write, huh?" Iruka-sensei, I love how you catch on quickly.

"Can you?" Please, for the love of god, make it easier on Shikamaru and me! I'm barely getting the hang of hiragana now that I can fucking read it well! "Please? I don't want Naruto to fail because he doesn't know how to write…"

That is like my biggest concern with Naruto. I know canon already had him as dead last, but I don't want him to be dead last like this. At least this way, Naruto has a better chance! I know that may or may not have an effect later on in life, but god dammit, I hate seeing my friends fall back like this!

"Don't worry about it, Chōko! I'll teach him!" Iruka-sensei smiled widely at me. "I'll make sure by the end of this week that he'll be able to write his name!"

"Really?!" Oh my god, I am not the unluckiest person in the world! At least, today I'm not! "Thank you!"

…

A few minutes later, I walked outside of the Academy building and found Naruto, Hinata, Shikamaru, and Chōji sitting under a big, shady tree. Shikamaru was still teaching Naruto how to read, and Hinata and Chōji seemed to be having a nice conversation about something. I have no clue whatever it was they were talking about, but both Hinata and Chōji were smiling, so it had to be something good.

Midway through lunchtime, I had a small scuffle with Naruto over the last salmon-filled onigiri. Hinata surprised all of us when she ate the last salmon-filled onigiri while Naruto and I were arguing. Initially, I was annoyed, but despite that, I couldn't help but laugh at what Hinata had done. We all
did... even Hinata, herself. She was having the time of her life, from the look of the smile on her face.

At the end of the day, when everyone was dismissed from classes, Naruto was told to stay behind by Iruka-sensei. While Naruto seemed disappointed (and maybe even concerned), I was actually pleased because Iruka-sensei was going to talk to Naruto about teaching him how to write. About ten minutes later, in which Hinata and I were waiting for Naruto outside of the Academy, Naruto ran over to us with a huge grin on his face.

"Iruka-sensei's gonna teach me how to write-ttebayo!" Naruto exclaimed.

"That's good to hear!" I smiled at Naruto. "Say, Naruto, Hinata... do you wanna visit my place?"

"You mean I can come over-ttebayo?!" The fact that Naruto seemed so shocked just hurt.

"Yeah... I'm pretty sure Chōji's already bringing over Shikamaru." Shikamaru has already been over to the Akimichi compound a number of times since Chōji and I befriended him. Our parents are quite lenient about bringing our friends over—hell! They encourage us to bring our friends over as much as we want! "So what do you say?"

"I-I'll come," Hinata replied.

"Hell yeah, dattebayo!" Naruto was really excited.

"Well then, follow me!" This was the best day ever!

In a similar vein as Hinata, I didn't tell Naruto that it was because of me that Iruka-sensei was going to teach him how to write. I had a feeling Iruka-sensei was going to eventually tell him, but I'd rather that happen than me telling Naruto myself. If only for a bit, I wanted Naruto to feel that someone else was doing something for him on their own accord.

A month from now, I will have realized what exactly happened when I decided to tell Iruka-sensei about Naruto's lacking writing skills. From a small discussion fueled by concern, came an opportunity for Umino Iruka and Uzumaki Naruto to bond much earlier than I would have ever expected.

...  
...

___________________________

**Zinnia: Loyalty**

...

...

**Pink Rose: Trust/Happiness/Confidence**

Chapter End Notes

So, as you can see from this chapter, I'm going through with Naruto’s “dattebayo/ttebayo” verbal tic. This was a challenge I put upon myself, whether or not I
can manage this verbal tic. And god dammit, I will TRY my hardest to work with it.
On a side note, the sad thing about Shippuden and me is that I’ve watched a lot of the
omake and little specials, like that one ramen-eating contest where Hinata won the
contest. I dunno about you, but ever since then, I had it in my head that Hinata can and
does eat a lot…but she keeps it to herself because it would be “unbecoming of a lady of
such noble status” and all that jazz.
So if you’re wondering why Hinata is the way she is here, it’s because of that. I
honestly find it interesting because with that, that makes Hinata yet another person in
Chōko’s circle of friends that eats a lot, the only current exception being Shikamaru.
And I honestly never noticed until now that Chōko’s status as an Akimichi would
actually have an effect, in regards to her friendship with Naruto. It only became apparent
when Hinata joined in the mix, as the Hyuuga are also part of the Four Noble Clans of
Konoha. As Naruto is friends with two (three, if you count Chōji) children who are part
of two out of the Four Noble Clans…I realized that connections are a thing and so you
get Naruto being left alone, for fear of people ruining their reputation. Be it, it won’t
stop all the mistreatment and harassment Naruto gets, but it does decrease enough for
Naruto to have a better childhood.
By the way, when Chōko asked Iruka if he could teach Naruto how to write, she did it
because she was out of ideas and Iruka seemed to be the best person to ask for such a
favor. She didn’t do it because it would be a good chance for him and Naruto to bond
until literally a month after she had asked Iruka to teach Naruto. Chōko lives in the
moment, as you have noticed. Sometimes, she doesn’t think of the affects her actions
might have until later on.
So, in a way, Chōko’s actions this time around were a mixture of indirect and direct.
And in regards to her friendship with Hinata, Chōko knows for a fact that Hinata can in
fact stand up for herself…Hinata just needs a little push. The pink rose Chōko gave
Hinata was that push.
There are also reasons why Hinata tries harder than she usually does, but I won’t go into
that just yet. Just know that Hanabi hasn’t been born yet…
For the most part, a lot of good things have been happening and there’s been a mostly
positive outlook. That is because Chōko wants to be as optimistic as ever. It lets her
enjoy the moment, which fits in with her, “we’ll cross that bridge when we get there”
mindset. Not exactly the best mindset, but in an emotional sense, it eases any concerns
Chōko has about the future, which is how she was able to get past the fact that she
knows Neji had died because she was appreciating the fact that he was alive when she
saw him.
So this A/N has been getting a little too long for my tastes, so I’ll stop right here. I hope
you guys enjoyed this chapter! I certainly did! That’s why there have been more updates
than usual! When I’m happy and enjoying myself, then I have an easier time writing
chapters! So I hope it stays that way for a while, since this story really gets my mind off
the stress of exams and college. So until next time, everyone!
First Impressions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next day, Aburame Shino joined our circle of friends. How this ended up happening is something that can be summarized as Chōko (me) finding praying mantises cute (they are the absolute cutest, next to snails), and Shino taking this glorious opportunity to socialize. Where did the praying mantis even come into the picture?

Well, it all happened during lunchtime. We were all just minding our business, eating lunch…and then Hinata started freaking out about something moving in her hair. I, being the daring and possibly overprotective friend, was quick to do something about it…and what I found in Hinata's hair was a praying mantis. Now I'm quite neutral to most types of bugs (unless they are wasps, hornets, and ants…those can go fall in a pit and roaches can just die), but I do have my favorites and a praying mantis just so happens to be one.

So after gently removing the praying mantis from Hinata's hair, I was immediately all over that bug, earning a number of strange looks from my friends as a result. Upon noticing said looks, I felt rather embarrassed, if only because it felt as though I was making an idiot out of myself, even though I wasn't.

Then freaking Shino caught us all off-guard by joining in on the conversation—how long has he been there? He probably came over as soon as he heard about the praying mantis I found. I know, praying mantises are pretty cool—wait, I'm getting off topic. Anyways, moments after Shino joined the conversation, I quickly realized how awkward this boy could come off as, due to his manner of speaking.

Now Shino isn't exactly that expressive of a person, but even I could tell that he was embarrassed to a certain extent after giving a couple of rather detailed facts on mantises (which I totally appreciate). He just stared at us as we stared back. We said nothing, and I was starting to feel restless with the awkward silence, so I said the first thing that popped into my mind.

"E-Eat?" Way to know how to word, Chōko.

At least it wasn't food, ahaha…

Shino just looked at me for a moment before faintly nodding his head. And that's all it really took for Shino to became part of our circle of friends. Circle of friends, circle of friends...

God, I miss my tenth grade English teacher...

…

…

Kunoichi classes went on as usual, except Hinata decided to tell me something she had kept from me during lunchtime as I was reading about flowers...

"What do you mean your father wants me over for dinner?" Where the hell did that come from? "Did you mention my name when you talked to your father the other day?"

Hinata shook her head. "N-No…but Neji-nii-sama t-told him about you..."
Dammit, Neji, why must you make everything difficult for me?! First Naruto, now me…I should've expected this, to be honest.

Still—what a jerk!

He and I are going to have some serious words, one of these days…or not. It depends if I can muster enough courage to do so.

"Am I going to have to dress up?" Because I honestly don't feel like wearing my yukata or kimono…I like being able to walk as freely as I can!

"N-No, you're fine," Hinata replied. "Wh-When do you th-think you can come?"

"Any time, I guess." To be honest, I don't really have anything better to do, so I usually have a lot of free time. "Just give me a day."

Hinata nodded. "I n-need to talk to my f-father, then…"

"Well, we'll figure it out tomorrow," I said as I rubbed the back of my head. "So do you know exactly how we're going to memorize the toxicity and non-toxicity of all these plants and flowers? Because I sure don't…"

You would think we would have already moved on from plants and flowers in class, but no. You'd be surprised how much more we had left to learn in kunoichi classes about them. In fact, the entirety of this month's kunoichi classes is dedicated to plants and flowers. By the end of this month, we're going to get quizzed on this shit and I know I'm gonna fail…unless Hinata knows the secret to success!

"Please tell me you have a faint idea of this?" Please, Hinata, you're my only hope!

Hinata stared at me for a moment and smiled. "L-Let's start by s-seeing how much you kn-know…"

…

…

When I had become friends with Hinata, I had a very faint feeling that I was going to eventually visit the Hyuuga compound because of our friendship. I just wasn't expecting it to be so soon. Let me tell you about the Hyuuga compound—it's huge. Like, holy crap! My body is not ready…I'm already having regrets and—oh shit, is that Hiashi?!

"Welcome to our home," Hiashi said formally as I walked through the door.

Almost immediately, I felt like a plebeian, far below Hiashi's status. I honestly never thought I would ever feel like this, but I dunno, a lot of things have happened since I was reborn into this world…am I staring? Oh crap, I think I am!

"Thank you for having me over!" I suddenly blurted out.

…

Smooth, Chôko, smooth.

First impressions are important and look what you just did, ya dunderhead. God dammit, I hope I didn't embarrass Hinata.
"I am so sorry…” My face heated up as I bowed apologetically at Hiashi.

Hiashi just looked at me for a moment before turning to Hinata. "This is your friend?"

"Y-Yes," Hinata replied. "Th-This is Akimichi Ch-Chōko."

"Akimichi Chōko…” Hiashi repeated, as he looked me over. I felt completely exposed under his gaze…those blank, white eyes—they stare into my soul. They’re nothing like Hinata's gentle eyes! "You must be the Akimichi with the fast-metabolism."

"I-I am…” Oh god, he's heard of me…

Is that really what people think when they hear my name?

"I see…” Hiashi turned his attention to Hinata. "Dinner will be ready in half an hour. You are free to do as you wish until then."

Hiashi left us right after saying that. Hinata and I waited until he was out of earshot before we both sighed in relief.

"Oh my god, I can’t believe I did that…” My heart pounding…and I feel like crying…am I? "Hinata, am I crying?"

"N-No, you're not…” Hinata frowned. "D-Do you feel l-like crying?"

"No…?" Emotions, stop, I do not need tears now!

Not here, at least!

"Do y-you want to g-go to my room?"

"Yes…”

…

…

Surprisingly enough, I did not cry. It probably helped that Hinata was brushing my hair. Getting my hair brushed always seems to calm me… Well, technically, the term would be combing, because Hinata is using a comb and the same term could be applied to Mama, but whatever (it's the same difference to me).

"D-Do you want m-me to do anything?" Hinata asked me.

I thought for a moment before replying, "Can you braid my hair? I-I mean…if you can, that is…”

It's okay if you can’t…

"I-I'll try…” Hinata said softly as she started to separate my hair.

Within the next eight minutes, Hinata managed to plait my waist-length hair into a neat braid. It's so weird, that a simple braid can make such a difference. My hair was no longer all over the place, but contained in that braid…just like how it used to be, in my past life.

Mamá…
Am I…am I really getting emotional over a braid?

Really, Chōko, really?

My head's hurting again, from thinking too much…but my chest feels so fuzzy and warm. I was so happy with the braid—so very, very happy… I think I'll keep it—no… I'm definitely keeping it. I'll keep it as long as I can…

"Thank you, Hinata!" Thank you for everything…

Breathe, Chōko—breathe!

"Y-You're welcome…" Hinata blushed.

"H-Hey… can I c-comb your hair?" I have been eyeing your hair since like forever and I want so badly to touch it and comb it and… please don't think I'm weird, please don't think I'm weird—

"You can." Hinata smiled at me as she handed me the comb.

I resisted the urge to squeal as I took the comb from Hinata. Whenever I see pretty hair, I just have this urge to touch it…I'm not a creeper, I promise!

…

Oh.

My.

God.

Hinata, I am extremely jealous of your hair. It's so soft and silky and such a pretty color and— "Can I have your hair?"

"N-No?" Hinata was probably caught off guard by my question. I wouldn't blame her.

"Sorry… I just really like your hair…" Not saying my hair is bad or anything, it's just… Hinata has dark blue hair and I think that is awesome. Meanwhile with me, I'm stuck with plain, brown hair that's the same color as Chōji's hair. I'm not saying having brown hair is bad, but I had dark brown hair in the past and being reborn in the Naruto world means you can have just about any color on the entire color spectrum as a hair color, so excuse me for hoping I had been born with Chōza's red hair… Why does he have red hair, anyway? Isn't that trait exclusive to the Uzumaki clan? Or are there genetic exceptions?

…

I have no idea.

I'm not a fucking geneticist… though I could have been in my past life. I was always good at the genetics portion of biology, but I was also a gamer girl and my love for video games overturns SCIENCE. Still, I am kinda curious of how genetics work here… no, Chōko! Bad… you're setting yourself up for a major headache.

You have enough headaches as is!

"Hello, what have we have here?" A soft, gentle voice snapped me out of my thoughts.
"Okaa-sama!" Hinata exclaimed, sounding both a little surprised and happy.

Upon hearing Hinata's exclamation, my attention quickly shifted to the person who I just recently noticed was in the room and—HOLY HELL! HINATA'S MOTHER IS GORGEOUS.

With pale skin like a porcelain doll, dark blue hair that's so long and looks so silky and lustrous. White, featureless eyes that should have probably looked so unnerving, but didn't, because of how full of love they were.

She's so pretty…

"Ahh…" I could feel my face heat up as I continued to stare at Hinata's mother, who just smiled gently at us. While I didn't see much of a resemblance between Hinata and Hiashi, with this lovely lady…I can see whom Hinata took after… Please tell me I'm not staring…

"Chōko-chan, a-are you okay?" Hinata asked me.

Dammit, I am staring! Quick, say something that won't embarrass yourself, Chōko! "You're gorgeous!"

That is not what I wanted to say!

Good going, Chōko!

"O-Oh, my!" Hinata's mother blushed in response to my outburst, in a manner most similar to what Hinata usually does.

Oh gosh, she's just as cute, too—aaaahhh!

I covered my mouth to avoid saying anything else that could embarrass me (aesthetically attractive people are my weakness), but I can tell that it's too late for that. My face was redder than a tomato by this point. My eyes were starting to feel a little misty, and my heart was pounding so hard, it felt like it was going to explode. Embarrassment hit me hard.

Thankfully, Hinata's mother was an absolute sweetheart and took my outburst as a compliment instead of thinking I was weird. "You have such a nice friend, Hinata-chan…did you braid her hair?"

"Y-Yes," Hinata replied.

"It looks nice on her," her mother remarked, her smile never once leaving her face. "It definitely suits her…"

I don't know why, but to hear that from Hinata's mother…it made me feel happy. I haven't had my hair braided since I was like…twelve-years-old in my past life. Then I got my first haircut and any chances of me being able to braid my hair went out the window. So having my hair in a braid again after so long…even if it is as Chōko, just—it just feels nice…especially since Hinata was the one to braid it.

"Oh, I almost forgot…I'm Hyuuga Himawari," Hinata's mother introduced herself. "It's nice to meet you…"

"Ch-Chōko!" I quickly responded. "Akimichi Chōko…"

I'm also known as the Akimichi with a fast-metabolism who breaks the occasional sliding door. You
might want to keep your sliding doors away from me…

"Akimichi Chōko…I see, I see…” Himawari certainly found me interesting. "Well, I'll be on my way. I just wanted to see my daughter's cute little friend, so excuse me if I interrupted anything."

Himawari left the room after that. It took me a minute to find my voice and tell Hinata, or rather, ask her, "Did your mother just call me cute?"

I can hear just fine and I know what Himawari just said…but for an attractive person to call me "cute"…I need a moment.

Oh god, I'm going to die young at this rate from blushing too much!

...

...

Dinner with the Hyuuga clan was going on exactly as how I had expected it to be: quiet, awkward, and tense—darnit, Neji! Stop staring at Hinata like that! I would say something, but considering my current position and the fact that I had already embarrassed myself enough as is, I stayed quiet. The last thing I need was Hiashi's stare on me again…those eyes.

Then Himawari smiled at me and I didn't feel as tense anymore. Seriously, Hinata's mother is a gem…

"How exactly did you and Hinata befriend each other, Akimichi-san?" Hiashi suddenly asked.

I nearly choked on a mouthful of rice when Hiashi had asked me that. I swallowed hard and tried ignore the stares that were directed at me. "Ah…Hinata was actually the one to befriend me…She defended me when these girls started picking on me during the first day of kunoichi classes…"

Breathe, Chōko, breathe—don't you dare cry!

"Did she…?" Hiashi's attention turned to Hinata, whose face was a brilliant shade of red. He seemed surprised. Maybe it was the thought that his shy, little daughter had somehow managed to defend someone like me from bullies. That seems to be the case.

Even Neji couldn't believe it—yeah, I saw that look! Don't think no one has noticed…

I'm watching you, boy…

Himawari seemed rather pleased with what she heard. "I see, I see…is there anything else you haven't told us yet, Hinata-chan?"

"Y-Yesterday, we made f-friends with Aburame Sh-Shino…” Hinata replied.

Hiashi took an interest with what he heard. "An Aburame…”

"First, an Akimichi, and then an Aburame?" Himawari smiled. "All that is left is an Uchiha…I hear the Uchiha clan head's youngest child is attending the Academy…Sasuke-kun, was it?"

Ahh, Sasuke…yeah, to be honest, I haven't been paying much attention to him…like, at all. I would rather not have thoughts on anything regarding the Uchiha Clan Massacre—nooope. He's still in the same class as me and he's like, what—four? His clan is still alive… Really, I'm not all too concerned about Sasuke just yet.
Not. Worried. **Nope.**

Hinata nodded her head. "H-He's in our class, b-but we haven't r-really talked to him…"

"Maybe you should try," Himawari suggested. "Wouldn't it be nice for the Four Noble Clans to form a close bond this way?"

"It would be beneficial in creating strong alliances." Hiashi agreed with his wife.

…Huh, it actually would. How the hell did I not notice this until now? Well, Hinata's *definitely* proving to be a promising heiress in the eyes of Hiashi—Neji, stop looking so annoyed. Can you like, for one second, put aside your disdain for your cousin and anyone within the Main House in general? Seriously, this is gonna be a fun seven to eight years…

At least dinner was less tense and nerve-wracking after that. Of course, Neji was still being a stick in the mud and…he has really nice hair.

> *So pretty and silky-looking—why is his hair so freaking nice?!*

Dammit, I'm doing it again. I need to stop staring at people—

"Do you need something?" Neji abruptly asked me.

I blinked as a small bead of sweat rolled down the side of my face. "Ah…"

> *When did he get so close—his hair fucking shines in the light!*

> *That's so not fair!*

"If you do not, then can you please stop staring at me?" Neji's brows were furrowed in annoyance. "Well?"

I stared at Neji for a full minute after that, trying to carefully choose my words.

"I think you have pretty hair." Well, I tried and it looks like I just dug my own grave.

> *It was nice knowing you, Hinata.*

On the bright side, at least I didn't blurt it out or anything, so I consider that progress and is Neji *blushing*?!

> *I didn't think Neji was the type to blush—aaahhhhh!*

"N-Neji-nii-sama, are you o-okay?" Hinata's question had all attention focused on Neji, whose face was a lovely shade of crimson.

Neji was too flustered to even answer Hinata. Apparently, my comment had caught him completely by surprise. Rather badly, at that, with the way he couldn't even form a coherent sentence.

…

> *I'm gonna die young, aren't I?*

…
It was safe to say that, by the end of the day, Neji had become completely wary of me, with the way he kept his distance. Himawari seems to like me and I have no idea what Hiashi even thinks of me. Hinata had a good time, at least…and I guess I did, as well. I mean, making Neji blush is quite the accomplishment…and I honestly wasn’t even trying. I was being completely honest about what I had said.

Still, I should work on avoiding outbursts like that in the future. Otherwise, my chance at the shinobi life will end before it can even begin.

*Let's try to *at least* make it to adolescence!*

Putting all that aside, life went on as usual. Hinata and I were still close, as was Naruto. Shino was slowly adjusting to our circle of friends (give him some time), and Shikamaru and Chōji might as well be part of that circle of friends. Life was definitely good and I can appreciate that.

About a week before Chōji and I turned five, we were asked to invite our friends over to the Akimichi compound for our birthday. While Chōji was quick to invite Shikamaru, he left the rest of the invitations to me, so I was the one who had to personally invite Hinata, Shino, and Naruto. Now that wasn’t too hard (surprisingly).

Except there's one thing I should have expected from inviting Hinata and Shino. And that was that word should have reached their parents. And if word reached their parents, chances are, they were most likely going to contact my parents. And for that reason alone, what was supposed to be a simple birthday party of sorts, turned into a gathering for the Four Noble Clans. Because the fact that I had managed to befriend a Hyuuga and Aburame wasn't overlooked so easily, as I had initially…and when I say Four Noble Clans, I mean *exactly* four.

Akimichi, Hyuuga, and Aburame…that's three, you're thinking.

*And you're right!*

Except, even though I have *yet* to associate with anyone within the clan, the Uchiha clan had been invited. So when I answered the door to greet our guests, I got one hell of a shock when I found myself staring into a pair of extremely distinct onyx-colored eyes belonging to none other than a four-year-old Uchiha Sasuke.

And holding onto Sasuke's hand, was Itachi, in his nine-year-old glory.

Huh, he does really look like a weasel…

"What?" Itachi suddenly said.

Oh fuck, did I say that out loud?

*Shit!*

Chapter End Notes
4-10-16 Even more edits and stuff and by the way, it was 11-5-14 when this chapter first went up, so the fact that Hinata's mother is named Himawari? All a coincidence, because I didn't know about Uzumaki Himawari until after and just…that fucking coincidence! Also, as an FYI, Chōko has a weakness towards people she considers aesthetically attractive. I mention it later, but like…Chōko is, like every other of my SI OCs, asexual—meaning she does not experience sexual attraction (just like me!). So yeah…but she does experience romantic attraction. So just keep that in mind.

If you honestly think about it, alliances can usually begin with friendships and if you take into consideration that three clans out of the four had their children befriend each other, then you will realize how much of an opportunity there is out of that. I only just realized that right after Shino entered the scene. Yes, I can be slow.

So I found out that Hinata's mother is a huge mystery. Like, is she alive or not? What is her name? For now, I can definitely say she is alive…and that her name is Himawari. Himawari, by the way, means sunflower, which has the meaning "love and respect" in the Japanese language of flowers. I dunno, I thought the name was fitting for someone who was Hinata's mother.

Moving on, in this chapter, you've noticed a quirk Chōko has, that quirk being how she says what is on her mind. It's not exactly how you'd imagine it to be, what with saying what's on her mind being things like, "you're gorgeous" and "you have pretty hair". More often than not, Chōko is going to end up embarrassing herself because of it. In hindsight, it makes her quite the unpredictable person, which can catch people, like Neji, by surprise. So there are pros and cons to it.

And if it weren't for the fact that I put priorities into video games, I'd probably be most likely invested in a field of science…genetics, based on how well I did on that portion in biology. It's either that or psychology…but I digress. Anyways, I do wonder how exactly genetics would work in the world of Naruto. I mean, when you got a wide array of hair types and colors, it just makes you wonder how likely the probability of traits like that being passed onto the offspring and I should stop talking science. But seriously, that would probably give a geneticist a headache.

Anyway, thanks to Hinata, Chōko now has her hair in a braid. It gives Chōko a sense of nostalgia and, in the long run, braids are the way to go if you have long hair and you're planning on fighting or running a lot. That's basically the shinobi life in a nutshell, so Chōko is prepared for that shit!

And if you're wondering about the comment involving that tenth grade English teacher…well, my tenth grade English teacher, as my Academic Decathlon coach in my senior year, would usually say, "Circle of friends, circle of friends" to refer to the entire class. It just caught on…

So there you have it. This chapter was basically learning more about Chōko as a person as she interacts with the world around her…and making friends with Shino. I am honestly a little disappointed with how little attention Shino got in this chapter, so I'm hoping to fix that soon because the poor guy gets ignored enough as is. Aside from that, I hope you enjoyed this chapter.

Until next time everyone!
I could already feel my face beginning to heat up as Itachi continued to stare at me. He probably wants to know what I had said, even though I was pretty sure he heard me correctly…

"She says you look like a weasel, Nii-san." Sasuke…I hate you.

"Ah…" was all Itachi said, his gaze never once leaving me.

Okay, I have my limits and I know it isn't exactly the best decision I have ever contemplated, but running away seemed like a highly appealing option to me…especially when you had two Uchiha staring you down with their pitch-black eyes…yeah, I'm gonna go before I embarrass myself.

Those eyes are gonna haunt my fucking dreams...

"Kaa-chaaan!" Welp, I'm definitely the champion of embarrassing myself. Running off, yelling for my mommy…doesn't get any better than that.

Ahahaha, there goes my reputation—whatever much of it even exists.

Now while I have effectively done a good job screwing up my chances at making a good impression on the Uchiha clan (only in my dreams, because as if I ever had a chance), or at least with Itachi and Sasuke, I managed to get some answers quite quickly through this method. Were there other methods that could have had the same outcome, minus the embarrassment? Possibly…but I'm still impulsive as ever.

Good ol' ADHD…

I was at least aware of the gathering of the Four Noble Clans after that…by the way, the Uchiha clan likes to show up early and I hate them for that. The reason why is because, until my friends show up, I was stuck with Itachi and Sasuke. And while I do appreciate that Chōji and Shikamaru are around, I really wish they weren't too busy playing shōgi with each other.

So it was just five of us, in a room, all on our own, while the adults were in another room. I believe they're trying to get us to socialize… I did hear Mikoto say something to Sasuke about being nice to me…

If he even tries anything funny, he's going through the door.

By the way, Sasuke's mother is also a gem (so pretty and nice and just lovely). I managed to keep myself from blurring out anything, if only because Mikoto seemed to have taken quite the interest in me (be still, my beating heart!). Apparently, Sasuke likes to talk about his classmates, and I happen to be the one he talks about the most. From my eating habits, to my glasses, to the fact that I have, within the span of a month, managed to break five sliding doors at the Academy, Sasuke has found me quite interesting.

In fact, I believe Sasuke's first words to me, upon recognizing who I was, were, "Hey, you're that glasses girl who eats a lot and broke those doors!"
So while I don't know much about Sasuke, he, apparently, does know about me...sort of.

_Ahaha, god dammit all..._

Is that how other people see me? Because if it is, that's just sad...I'm more than that. I think I now know how it feels to be Sasha, what with her "Potato Girl" status. Okay, new goal: Avoid becoming the next Potato Girl.

"How can you see with these things?" Sasuke asked, moments after taking my glasses and putting them on himself.

"H-Hey!" I need those things for reading and crap!

At that moment, Itachi poked Sasuke in the forehead and took my glasses from him, which he was quick to hand back to me. "Be nice to girls, Sasuke."

"Nii-sama!" Sasuke whined as he rubbed his forehead. "Did you really have to do that?"

It's weird seeing Sasuke act like a kid. At the same time, it's kinda annoying because Sasuke is acting like a kid...I don't know what he'll do next! I'm too used to the cold, cynical and arrogant person he grew up to be because of the Uchiha Clan Massacre. I did not sign up for this!

_You didn't sign up for anything, Chôko!_

Thankfully, Itachi knows how to keep his little brother on a leash (figuratively), so I didn't have to put up with Sasuke trying to steal my glasses again. What I _did_ have to put up was this:

"Why aren't you fat?" Sasuke asked quite bluntly as he poked me in the stomach.

What is my life? To have to put up with the curiosity of a four-year-old Uchiha...what did I do to deserve this— "Stop poking me!"

"But you're so skinny, even though you eat a lot!" Why thank you, Sasuke...for confirming something I already _know_. "Why are you making a scary face?"

_Please stop talking._

"Chôko has a fast-metabolism," Chôji ended up answering Sasuke's question for me. "Because of it, she has a harder time gaining weight."

"If any, then it's not much," Shikamaru added. "Of course, there's probably more to it than just that, but that's as much as we know, for now..."

"Does that answer your question?" I looked at Sasuke, hoping that it would get him to stop asking questions. I've reached a point where I'm afraid I might snap at Sasuke, which is the last thing I wanted to do at a gathering like _this_.

_The doors do not need to suffer for this!_

Sasuke thought for a moment...and then turned to Chôji. "Is that why she isn't fat like you?"

Oh shit, you've done it now, boy—wait, no, that's not what I wanted to happen! "Chôji, no!"

_You're better than this!_
When Hinata entered the room about fifteen minutes later, she and her clan having just arrived, Shikamaru was teaching me the basics of shōgi, Itachi was lecturing Sasuke about the consequences of lacking tact, and Chōji was on the floor in an unconscious heap. Hinata was quite confused with the scene and was about to ask what had happened, but after hearing the simultaneous "Don't ask" response from Itachi, Sasuke, Shikamaru, and me, she decided not to ask.

Itachi had made all of us swear that we didn't see him knock out Chōji…even though we did. Of course, the only reason Itachi even did that in the first place was because Chōji nearly tackled Sasuke. And, while it wouldn't be of much concern if anyone else had done it…Chōji is physically strong (just like me, minus all the door-breaking I've done) and the last thing any of us needed was for one of us to get hurt.

By the way, am I ever glad to see Hinata! "You're here!"

"Y-Yeah…" Hinata nodded her head.

I was so happy…then Neji entered the room and I could literally hear my happiness shatter like broken glass. Oh boy, this birthday is definitely turning into one that I won't be forgetting any time soon…and I mean that in a bad way.

At least, that was what I had thought until Hinata whispered into my ear. "N-Neji-nii-sama goes quiet wh-whenever your name gets m-mentioned…"

"Nuh-uh!" Don't tell me…

"Uh-huh…I th-think you've left q-quite the impression on him." Hinata tried to suppress a mirthful smile that tugged at her lips. "W-Watch…Neji-nii-sama!"

Neji turned his attention to Hinata. "What is it, Hinata-sama?"

"A-Aren't you going to g-greet Chōko-chan?" Hinata asked innocently, as if she wasn't doing it on purpose.

For a brief moment, a scowl crossed Neji's face before his expression went completely blank. He looked in my direction, without actually looking at me, and calmly said, "Good afternoon, Akimichi-san."

"Just Chōko is fine," I said almost automatically.

Neji stiffened, almost as if he hadn't expected me to respond at all. "Very well, Chōko-san…"

I didn't bother saying anything else, because I can tell that Neji was pissed off at me. At the same time, he was also very cautious of me, as if I was going to say something that would have caught him completely off guard, as I had done back at the Hyuuga compound.

If this is what the impression I left on him had, then I'm honestly amused…and happy, because I have accomplished my goal. I had made Neji pay.

Awesome.

…

Neji refused to look in my direction after that. In fact, he kept to himself at the far end corner of the room. He kept a watchful eye on Hinata, but whenever he caught me looking at him, he immediately averts his gaze. I had to keep myself from laughing out loud, because, even though Neji wants
absolutely nothing to do with me, I didn't want to piss him off…at least, any more than I already have.

I wanna live, dammit!

Besides, I had much more things to worry about…like defeating Shikamaru in shōgi. Of course, I already know he's going to beat me, but that doesn't mean I'll won't try!

I'm gonna try my hardest, even if it means burning out my brain!

"Tch, troublesome…" Shikamaru remarked as he made a move.

Please tell me I'm putting him in a corner…I at least want to do that once, because even if I lose, I'll at least have put up a challenge to some extent.

...

...

Did you know that a game of shōgi can go on for hours? Because I certainly did—thank you, Shion no Ou, for preparing me for this… Only an hour has passed, but somehow…I haven't lost yet.

How the fuck—

I call it beginner's luck…actually, it's more like I'm bullshitting my way through this game because I have no fucking clue what I'm doing. Shikamaru tried his best to teach me the rules, but they just went over my head (living the ADHD life!), so all I know is the movement of pieces and I'm surprised I managed to get that down on the first try.

Then again, Shikamaru gave me visual examples for that...

This is probably why Shikamaru hasn't defeated me yet…because I keep catching him off-guard with my bullshit moves.

The power of bullshit compels you!

"That's a bad move," Itachi remarked after I moved a piece.

"Shut up, Itachi!" Gosh, I know I'm a horrible player, but you don't have to rub it in and…I just told him to shut up, didn't I?

Oops...

"Ch-Chōko-chan!" Hinata was astonished.

"You can't tell Nii-san to shut up!" Sasuke was mad.

"Troublesome…" Shikamaru couldn't give a damn.

"Wh-What happened?" Chōji just woke up.

And if you listen closely, you can hear the beautiful sound of Neji being quiet.

Such a majestic creature...

Meanwhile with Itachi, he was slightly stunned over the fact that a five-year-old girl (me) just told
him to shut up without any hesitation. The fact that I did it while saying his first name without any honorifics just made it even more shocking. Yeah, about that…I wasn't thinking—please don't be mad!

"I'm sorry Itachi-san!" I looked down in shame. "I didn't mean to—!"

"I-It's fine," Itachi said calmly, his expression still that of slight shock. "You just…surprised me."

Yeah, I have that effect on people. Just hope you don't end up like dear Neji over there in the corner—hiii, I can see you staring! Yeah, you better look away…I am enjoying this way too much.

Snap!

And I just lost my piece to Shikamaru!

"Itachi-san is right, that was a bad move." Don't even start, Shikamaru!

...

Shino showed up five minutes later, but we didn't know that for nearly ten minutes because he didn't say anything (that little sneak!). If he keeps that up, I am seriously tying a bell on him to notify any of us when he is in the vicinity. At least he'll be capable of doing stealth missions…

"Who is winning?" Shino asked.

"We…don't know." I'm honestly sad to admit that.

"At the moment, you have the upper-hand," Shikamaru remarked.

"Really?!!" Holy shit!

Snap!

"Had," Shikamaru corrected himself as he took another of my pieces, grinning afterwards in response to my glare.

"Don't give me false hope!" You're just setting me up for disappointment, ya lazy jerk! Go back to your sloth-like ways! "Just for that…take this!"

Snap!

...

"You're bad at this." Shut up, Sasuke—wait, how come you know the rules?!

That's not fair!

...

...

It took a total of two hours and thirty minutes for Shikamaru to finally kick my ass in shōgi. I was mentally exhausted by then…never again! It's like playing a game of Munchkin Apocalypse and everyone is going easy on each other instead of backstabbing each other…things go on far longer than they should, when they could've ended earlier, but they didn't… The next time I'm playing Shikamaru, I want it to be when I know how to actually play.
I took off my glasses and rubbed my eyes, taking a moment to enjoy the sensation. "I think I need some fresh air...I'm gonna be outside."

I might as well see if Naruto has arrived yet—what the hell is taking him so long? I would have expected Naruto to be the first person to have arrived, not Shikamaru...then again, his mother was the one who dragged his lazy ass all the way over to the Akimichi compound.

*Yoshino is a woman not to be crossed.*

...\n
Huh, it's a pretty nice day outside, actually...maybe I should suggest a game of ninja to the others and— "Naruto, what took you so long?!"

*Do NOT give me a Kakashi-esque excuse!*

Naruto laughed nervously as he rubbed the back of his head. "Sorry, I just needed to do something first...hey, can you turn around for me?"

I stared at Naruto for a minute, wondering quite briefly if I should really trust this kid before deciding to take my chances. I turned around for Naruto, hoping that it wasn't one of his pranks that he was going to pull on me. I don't mind being pranked (to a certain extent), but I do mind when it's on my birthday.

"Hold still." Naruto, what are you doing—why are you touching my hair? "Don't move!"

"I swear, it better not be a prank." And if it is, it better be one that'll make me laugh, or else I'll get mad.

"It's not!" Naruto insisted. "Sheesh...okay, I'm done!"

Almost immediately, I touched the back of my head, wondering what exactly was it that Naruto had done...What is this in my hair? What exactly am I feeling in the back of my head? "Naruto, what am I touching right now?"

"It's a ribbon!" Naruto replied. "Course, you can't see it right now, but I thought it would look nice on you..."

"You got me a ribbon?" I actually like ribbons, but I never wore one in my hair before...until now! "Thank you!"

Naruto grinned widely. "It's nothing—oh, and happy birthday! I wanted to get something for Chōji, too, but the lady at the shop didn't give me enough time to look for something for him."

"It's fine!" I reassured Naruto. "You can just get him a bag of his favorite potato chips later on."

"Yeah, you're right." Naruto nodded his head.

Even though Naruto is still pretty much hated by the majority in this village, people have started to tolerate him to a certain extent. This is an example of how Naruto's been tolerated. It's not much, but it's a start.

*It's as good as it's going to get for now.*
"Come on in, everyone is here!" I exclaimed. "I was just thinking of getting everyone to play a game of ninja!"

"Really? Awesome, dattebayo!" Naruto really likes playing games with others. I'm pretty sure anyone would after years of exclusion and isolation.

*Chôko, discard that train of thought now!*

Ugh, my head hurts as much as my chest, now…

…

When I brought Naruto into the room where the others were, Chôji, Shikamaru, Hinata, and Shino were quite quick to greet him. Neji stayed silent, Sasuke started staring, and Itachi's eyes widened slightly. It took me a moment to realize that three of the people in the room have never interacted with Naruto…and judging by the look on Itachi's face, he knows stuff.

"This is Naruto!" I said out loud, as I introduced him to Itachi, Sasuke, and Neji.

Neji didn't even bother to look at Naruto, Itachi seemed to acknowledge the boy, and Sasuke just continued staring…what are you planning?

"Why is the dead-last here?" Sasuke asked in a typically blunt manner.

I…should have expected that…okay, yeah, I didn't. And yeah, even though Naruto knows how to read and his writing skills have improved (he can, in fact, write his own name); he is still dead-last in our class. Of course, it's only been a month, and I'm sure Naruto will eventually move up from his dead-last spot…at least, I hope. He at least has a better chance at improving than he did when he didn't know how to read or write.

"He is my *friend*!" I said as if it was obvious, hoping that Sasuke would stop asking questions.

Sasuke blinked. "…Why are you friends with the dead-last?"

*God dammit, Sasuke, you have no tact!*

"Stop calling me dead-last-ttebayo!" Great, now you've pissed off Naruto!

"But it's true!" Shut *up*, Sasuke, you're making it worse!

"That doesn't mean I want to hear it, dattebayo!" Naruto gets enough as is from the rest of our class, because let's face it, no matter who you are, bad grades are still a legitimate reason to be picked on for if you attend the Academy.

*I am still trying to comprehend how legitimate this reason actually is…*

*Even though it's complete bullshit.*

"Hey, is that a ribbon in your hair?" Chôji suddenly asked me, most likely in an attempt to prevent Sasuke and Naruto from getting into a fight by switching the attention onto me. I don't exactly appreciate this, but if it means preventing a fight, then I'll play along.

"Yeah, Naruto gave it to me!" I have no idea what color it is or how it looks, but I already love it!

*Because it's from a friend!*
"It looks weird." Way to be a buzzkill, Sasuke…anything else you'd like say—actually, don't say anything else. "And ugly…"

That was what set Naruto off and had him tackling Sasuke onto the floor.

**THUD!**

"Take it back-ttebayo!" Naruto demanded as he had Sasuke pinned underneath him.

**THUD!**

Sasuke managed to flip himself and Naruto over so that their positions were reversed. "No—ugh!"

Naruto just kicked Sasuke off of himself…right in front of Itachi.

> Do you have a death wish, friend?!

Itachi, why are you just watching? Why aren't any of us doing anything?! Don't tell me the bystander effect is still a thing—no, don't fight back, Sasuke!

"Augh!" And that was the sound of Naruto crying out in pain from having Sasuke kick him in the crotch. "You!"

And there's the obligatory "teme" I should have seen coming…why didn't I see it coming? I should have expected it the minute Sasuke started calling Naruto, "Dead-last." Seriously, Itachi, why aren't you doing anything? And great, now Naruto and Sasuke are wrestling each other on the floor.

> Well, it could be worse…

…

…

No wait, it is worse! The gathering of the Four Noble Clans is going on in the next room—this is *not* something that should happen now! Naruto, Sasuke…I know you two have this future rivalry in the making, but can you *not* establish it here?! For the love of—if you're not gonna do anything, Itachi, then *I* will!

"Okay, break it up, you two!" Do *not* make me use force—okay, fuck it. I'm using force. "Stop fighting!"

…

…

You know, when I ran up to Naruto and Sasuke and shoved them apart, I had been hoping that the adults in the next room wouldn't have heard the loud sound the two made when they landed on the floor.

"What is going on?!" Too bad they did, and now Uchiha Fugaku wanted answers.

> Shit.

…

Why is everyone quiet all of a sudden? And why are all the adults staring? I slowly turned my head
in the direction they were all staring in and soon found myself looking at Naruto.

…

Oh.

Oh.

OH SHIT—I forgot Naruto’s the village’s pariah because of his jinchuuriki status! While the Akimichi clan has been pretty accepting of him, that doesn't mean the rest of the Four Noble Clans were just as accepting! I need to do something quick and—

"Is there something wrong, Otou-san?" Itachi suddenly asked, his question causing all attention to shift toward him. "Have we been too disruptive?"

Fugaku stared at his oldest son and turned to my father, who stood right next to him. I'm not sure what it was he said to my father, but almost right after, Chōza excused himself and everyone else for the interruption. Chōza closed the door right after and I was pretty sure he and the other adults were returning to the other room…probably to talk about something that involves a certain jinchuuriki.

Well, I fucked up…might as well try to make the best of this situation. I tried to suggest that we all play ninja, but then Naruto looked at me and asked, "Why were they looking at me like that?"

I nearly cringed upon seeing the look on Naruto's face. Even though he was smiling, the stream of tears that were trailing down his cheeks revealed how hurt Naruto felt.

"Wh-Why?" Naruto asked again, his voice cracking.

"I don't know…" was all I could even say.

Naruto started crying after hearing my response. I felt a pang in my chest and my eyes beginning to sting. I turned to the others, taking note of how shocked Shikamaru, Chōji, Hinata, and Sasuke all looked. Shino, as expressionless as he usually is, seemed visibly disturbed. Itachi had a melancholic look in his eyes and Neji actually seemed troubled.

This isn't supposed to happen…

God dammit, this was supposed to be a happy day… We were having a great time, and then this shit happened.

"It's not fair…" I'm crying…even though I'm trying not to. It's…hard…especially when you're barely five-years-old. To live in a world that I once thought was fictional was quite the different experience than viewing it from an observer's perspective. It just showed how cruel the world could really be…

"It's just not fair…"

Chapter End Notes

4-10-16 More edits still on the way, aaaaaayyyyy! Also, Chōko may have the mentality of an adult, but she is also physically a child. Keep that in mind.

This was supposed to be a lighthearted chapter, but then this happened and now we got
a crying Naruto. By the way, young Sasuke is fucking difficult to work with and because of that, he ended up becoming this blunt kid who lacks tact. Course, he's only like four years old, so he's bound to change as he grows up…but for the most part, he lacks tact.

And Itachi is sorta easy to work with…sort of, I dunno. I'm working with nine-year-old Itachi here, who is STILL a Genin, by the way. And I tried…I really tried, but somehow Shino still ended up getting little attention in this chapter. God dammit…

And if you're wondering about Shion no Ou, it's a manga with a plot revolving around shōgi, so I highly suggest you guys check it out. And Munchkin Apocalypse is this game I play with my college friends where we start at level one and work our way to level ten…all while either teaming up with each other or backstabbing each other. First person to reach level ten wins, so that's why there's the motive for backstabbing…yup. It's pretty fun. But yeah, Munchkin Apocalypse is basically another version of Munchkin, which has the same premise, but without the hassle of seals and more fantasy-oriented.

Also, thanks to Naruto, Chōko now has a ribbon in her hair. She doesn't know what color it is or how it looks, but she loves it nonetheless. AND JUST TO CLARIFY, Neji is the way he is because Chōko caught him badly by surprise in the last chapter. Neji has no idea what to expect and is extremely wary of Chōko...this amuses Hinata, by the way. Let's consider this some form of karma for the way Neji has been treating Hinata...yeah.

I should also clarify that Sasuke only has an interest in Chōko because she seems interesting (eating habits, glasses, and breaking doors) and if you're wondering about Sasha and Potato Girl, yes, I was making an Attack on Titan/Shingeki no Kyojin reference. Honestly, I don't think Sasha will ever live down her Potato Girl status...of course, that's why I love her.

And I'm not going into detail about the whole "teme" thing, aside from pointing out that it just really is an extremely rude way to say, "You." I'll leave it at that.

Well, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! That's it for now, so until next time, everyone!
Right after I started crying, Sasuke followed in suit…then Hinata, Chōji, and Shikamaru. Even Shino started crying, but he was quiet about it, unlike the rest of us. And though he tried to hide it, Neji, too, was also crying. He had tried to make it seem as if he hadn't been bothered by the fact that Naruto and the rest of us were crying…and failed.

Only Itachi wasn't crying…but he was visibly distressed to be in a room full of crying children. For a nine-year-old, this was probably a nightmare. He just looked at all of us as we cried and then promptly left the room. Less than five minutes later, Mikoto barged into the room and witnessed the chaos that was before her.

Slowly, one by one, the rest of the adults showed up. They stared at us as we continued to cry, most likely wondering what that had upset us. When Itachi moved his way to the front of the crowd that had gathered around the doorway, Sasuke looked at him and asked a very good question.

"Why is everyone mean to Naruto?" was the question Sasuke asked that had every one of us thinking. "Why?"

*Why Naruto?*

*Why?*

*He's only four!*

*He didn't do anything wrong!*

Hinata, Chōji, Shikamaru, and I started to cry even harder, with Sasuke doing the same immediately right after. I really don't like crying…I did enough of that as a kid in my past life. I wanted to stop, but the tears won't stop and my chest just hurts.

*It hurts it hurts it hurts!*

*It hurts!*

I couldn't exactly tell what was going on after that, as I was too busy bawling my eyes out. All I know is that someone, Mikoto, most likely, had Itachi take all us kids outside of the Akimichi compound.

I have no idea how long we were crying, but apparently, it was long enough for all of us to pass out. Because the next thing I knew, I was waking up. I took off my glasses and rubbed my eyes, putting my glasses back on to take a better look at my surroundings. Itachi and Neji were sitting together, with their backs against a tree. Sasuke, Naruto, Hinata, Chōji, and Shīkamaru were all sleeping on the grass. Shino seemed to be awake, from the way he just looked at me upon realizing that I had woken up.

"Wh-What happened?" I found myself asking, my throat somewhat hoarse from crying so hard.

"Most of us fell asleep," Shino replied. "Itachi-san and Neji-san have been watching over us…I woke up just a few minutes ago. How are you doing?"
I blinked. "I think...I'm fine?"

_My head hurts, and so does my chest..._

"You're not sure." Shino's tone was frank.

I frowned. "Yeah...hey, Itachi-san...what's going to happen?"

Itachi focused his eyes on me. "I don't know...anything could happen."

"Nii-saaaaan!" Okay, Sasuke just woke up. "Are we in trouble?"

Itachi thought for a moment. "No...but the adults are talking."

"Probably about Naruto," I huffed.

"Most likely about Naruto-kun," Shino agreed. "Why? Because Naruto-kun is someone people in this village don't want to associate with...with the exception of us."

I wasn't lying about how Shino's manner of speaking could come off as awkward. At least he doesn't make an idiot out of himself (like me), but awkward is still awkward.

"Why do you even associate with Uzumaki?" Ah, and he speaks! Neji, you better be prepared because I won't go easy on you if you step out of line.

"You can thank Chōko for that." Aaaand Shikamaru woke up and pretty much caught me off guard because now everyone is looking at me.

"Uh...uuuuhhh..." C'mon, Chōko, you know how to word...sort of. "Food?"

_Dammit, Chōko, you don't have food this time to fix everything!_

"What kind?" Chōji, you picked the best time to wake up. "Wait, what happened?"

"We fell asleep..." Shikamaru said before yawning loudly. "Troublesome..."

Chōji rubbed his eyes and then stretched out his arms. "So what's going on right now?"

"We're answering Neji-san's question on why we're friends with Naruto," Shikamaru explained. "And I said it's because of your sister."

"Ooh yeah!" Chōji grinned. "You're right about that!"

I sputtered. "Ch-Ch-Chōji!"

Chōji rubbed the back of his head. "Well, it's because of you that we decided to hang out with Naruto...I mean, you two were having trouble reading."

"And then we found out that the reason Chōko had problems reading is because she needs glasses..." No one needed to know that, Shikamaru.

"Is that why you wear glasses?" Except for Sasuke...and now that I realize it, thank you, Shikamaru, for answering a question that Sasuke was eventually going to ask me...probably. "I didn't know that!"

"Well, now you know!" Oh my god, this conversation is getting off topic—oh, fuck you, irony. I do
not appreciate you! "And yes, it's because of me, that everyone is friends with Naruto! I introduced Hinata to Naruto and, according to Chōji, I'm the reason he and Shikamaru are friends with Naruto. Shino... why are you friends with Naruto?"

Shino just joined our circle of friends... just like that, I mean.

"Aren't we all friends?" That's a valid point, Shino.

"Well, there you have it!" I'm honestly surprised Hinata and Naruto are still asleep and—scratch that, make that just Naruto. Hinata just woke up. "Does that answer your question, Neji?"

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"Oops, forgot the honorific—no one heard that!"

"Wow, you're really rude." Oh, shut up, Sasuke. I don't want to hear the pot calling the kettle black. "Ow!"

"You shouldn't be talking, Sasuke," Itachi said after poking his little brother on the forehead. Thank you for that, by the way.

"N-Neji-nii-sama, are you o-okay?" Hinata's question towards Neji caught my attention.

"I'm fine," Neji insisted, even though the blush on his face said otherwise.

"Your face says otherwise, Hyuuga-san," Itachi remarked.

Neji scowled. "I did not ask for your input, Uchiha-san."

"Okay, that's enough out of you two!" You two are like one off-hand comment away from fighting! Be it, it'll be a one-sided fight since Itachi is a pacifist (even so, he can still probably kick ass without hurting people too seriously), but a fight nonetheless! "Conflict will only lead to problems, especially since you two are an Uchiha and a Hyuuga!"

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"I apologize for yelling!" I was quick to blurt out when Itachi and Neji started staring at me.

"No... it's fine." Itachi didn't seem to mind. "You're right... we were on the verge of conflict, weren't we, Hyuuga-san?"

Neji didn't look like he wanted to admit it, but he did. "Correct... I should be the one apologizing."

And he did, though a bit begrudgingly... but still, Neji apologized. I guess this is what happens when Uchiha Itachi is in the vicinity.

"Though, what are we going to do about him?" Itachi turned his attention to Naruto, who was still asleep on the ground.

Naruto looked so calm, and at peace... so very much different from how he had appeared when he asked why everyone had been staring at him. The poor kid was probably used to being stared at like that, but seeing his friends' families doing that were probably what did it in for him. Of course, he doesn't know... he doesn't know how Hinata had to stand up for herself when her father wanted her to stop being friends with him.
I'm pretty sure the Aburame clan couldn't care less, as Shino said his family respected the people he decided to associate with, as it was his choice. I guess the only reason they were staring is because they haven't been expecting to see Naruto. I mean, with the Hyuuga clan and Uchiha clan over, I wouldn't blame them…well, how was I supposed to know this birthday turned into a gathering for the Four Noble Clans of Konoha?!

*I'm not omniscient, dammit!*

Still, I should have realized something from the minute Naruto tied the ribbon into my hair and—why are you staring, Shino?

"Your ribbon is off," he suddenly said. "The tie is messy and uneven…"

I blinked a few times and realized…this is probably why Sasuke said it looked weird and ugly. Naruto and Sasuke got into a fight because of a miscommunication…god dammit, this is why people need to learn how to speak! If there's anything I learned when I read *Frankenstein* during my senior year of high school, it's that shit like this can *kill!* And that it's thanks to Hollywood that people keep making a mistake that Frankenstein is the monster, when he really is the doctor because the Creature never got a name and—oh my god, Chōko, stop being a *nerd*!

"Would you mind if I fix it?" Shino asked.

"Ah…you can…" I was a little surprised to hear Shino even asking that, I mean…I'd expect Hinata to be the one to ask this, but I guess this is fine… "Do you…want me to get closer?"

Shino nodded his head.

…

After Shino fixed my ribbon, Sasuke took one look at me and smiled. "It's pretty now!"

*So it was the fucking tie—unbelievable!*

"Wh-What's pretty?" Looks like Naruto just woke up…

"Hey sleepyhead, you awake now?" I hope Naruto is feeling a little better now.

Naruto rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Y-Yeah…hey, am I…am I in trouble?"

"I hope not." I'd be really mad if Naruto got in trouble for doing absolutely nothing…actually, he and Sasuke *did* get in a fight, so there's that… But I swear, if that isn't the reason Naruto gets in trouble, *if* he does…then I'm gonna break a door! I'm gonna break all the doors!

*ALL OF THEM!*

*Growl.*

Oh, screw you, stomach… "Ugh…I'm hungry…"

"Nii-san, let's go eat!" Well, aren't you trying to get on my good side, Sasuke.

…

Itachi, being the older brother he is to Sasuke and the cool kid towards the rest of us, decided to take us out to eat. He took us to an Akimichi clan restaurant upon hearing about the discount. Again, that discount is a very lovely thing to have. About fifteen minutes after entering the restaurant, we all
came out of it, each carrying a bento box.

We all returned to our previous location by the tree, where we had fallen asleep under after crying. Itachi seemed rather relaxed now, as did Neji, but only by a bit. Naruto seemed to be in a better mood and Hinata was happy. I was also happy, as was Chōji and Shikamaru couldn't probably give a damn, but he did seem to be having a good time. Sasuke was scarfing down the tomatoes that were in his bento box, so he was enjoying himself. Shino…well, he was eating, so I can only assume he likes the food. It's difficult to read Shino's expressions at times…

"Hey...do you guys...do you guys hate me-ttebayo?" Naruto, where the hell did you ever get that idea? "When adults look at me like that, their kids tend to hate me..."

Oh fuck, he's learning...go away, feels! I need to be the supporting friend! "I don't hate you!"

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Okay, wow, that came out louder than it should have. It definitely sounded quieter in my head...and now everyone is looking at me...

"Wh-Why would you th-think that?" At least Hinata is trying to be a supporting friend, too.

"If I hated you, I wouldn't have bothered teaching you how to read." Nice point you got there, Shikamaru.

"You haven't done anything bad," Chōji added.

"Why were they staring, then?" Naruto looked expectantly at me. He wanted an answer, one that I knew, but couldn't to tell him...

"I haven't an idea why, but the majority of this village wishes to dissociate with you." Shino took the task of answering Naruto's question. "We happen to be the exception...most of us, at least."

"I don't hate you!" Sasuke seemed to want to make that fact clear. "I barely know you, so why would I hate you?"

"I don't necessarily hold any particular emotion toward Naruto," Itachi stated. "But I can assure you that, whatever emotion I do hold towards him, it isn't anything remotely negative."

Neji is the only one of us who didn't say anything. He probably has nothing nice to say. If that is the case, then I'm glad he's staying quiet.

"Please don't cry, Naruto..." Because if you cry, then I'll cry and then everyone else will also cry... except Itachi, he'll just panic and go to the adults for some sort of aid. I think it is safe to say that, at Itachi's current age and state, crying children are his weakness. He was not trained for this. "You're not alone, ya know."

We have each other.

"I'm...not?" Naruto paused for a moment. A few seconds passed and a huge grin crossed his face as he loudly exclaimed, "I'm not alone!"

"You only just realize that now?" We've been friends for over a month now, Naruto. You are part of a circle of friends. Iruka-sensei has been teaching you how to write. Loneliness is something you
should not be experiencing…unless—wait…oh god.

"It's just…I didn't think this was what it mean to not be alone!" Naruto, you idiot—I didn't need you confirming my horror! "It's…nice."

Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry—dammit, I'm crying! "Y-You i-idiot…!"

Oh god, this is not fair!

"I'm not an idiot, I—Chōko-chan! Why are you crying-ttebayo?!" Naruto started panicking when he noticed that I was crying. "W-Was it something I said, dattebayo?! H-Hey—Chōko-chan!"

"Just shut up, you idiot!" I took off my glasses and tried my very best to wipe away the tears, but the tears! They just kept coming! Why won't they stop?! "I hate this…"

"Oooohhh, I see!" Naruto started laughing. "This is like that one time at Ichiraku Ramen! You know, when I took you and Hinata-chan there!"

Naruto, please don't bring up that moment…

"Aah, th-that's right!" Hinata agreed. "Chōko-chan s-started crying because y-you said something, N-Naruto-kun."

Hinata, please don't help out…

"Huh, what did I say-ttebayo?" Naruto rubbed the back of his head.

Good, he doesn't remember that well…

"Y-You said you were h-happy that someone wasn't m-mean to you," Hinata replied.

"You two are the worst friends ever!" I whined as I continued to rub my eyes. "Ugh…"

"It seems Chōko-san is capable of being this sensitive," Shino remarked, almost sounding intrigued.

"It just shows she cares," Chōji said with a grin.

"That's one heck of a way to show it." Shikamaru seemed amused.

"No one asked for your opinion!" I turned away from Shikamaru in a huff. "Geez…"

At least I've stopped crying…no, the tears are still there. Ugh, dammit, I hate this…

"Tsuntsun!" Sasuke was quick to exclaim.

"What?" I turned to Sasuke, who was currently pointing at me.

"Tsuntsun!" Sasuke repeated. "That's what you are—ow!"

"Sasuke, it isn't polite to point at people," Itachi said after he had finished poking Sasuke on the forehead. "You're being rather rude today…"

"Sorry Nii-san…" Sasuke apologized. "But she is tsuntsun…"

"I am not!" I snapped in a manner that only seemed to prove Sasuke's point.

"You certainly sound like it right now." I'd rather not hear it coming from you, Neji—holy shit,
"Hey, you stopped crying-ttebayo!" Naruto exclaimed, catching me completely off-guard.

I blinked a few times and rubbed my eyes, realizing that Naruto was in fact, correct. I blinked again and put my glasses back on. Oh man, it feels nice to see nearby objects again and not have my vision blurred by tears and my hyperopia. "Finally…"

"Hey glasses girl!" Sasuke suddenly called out to me.

I narrowed my eyes at Sasuke. "I have a name…it's Chōko."

"Okay, Chōko!" Sasuke was quick to correct himself. "Say, we're friends, right?"

"What?" Okay, give me a moment to process what you just said, Sasuke. "Friends…?"

Sasuke nodded his head. "Yeah, friends! I mean…that is…if you're fine with it…are you?"

"Since we first met, you've been a rude little kid to me…and you're asking if we're friends?" Really, Sasuke, really?

Sasuke looked sheepishly at me. "S-Sorry…"

"Nah, I'm just messing with ya!" Dude, I love having friends…like, I have a hard time making them, so the fact this kid wants to be friends is just…I'm honestly happy. "We're friends, Sasuke!"

Friend obtained—it's like an RPG!

"Does this mean I can be part of your group?" Sasuke looked at everyone else. "Huh? Am I?"

Okay, it seems that Sasuke has been eyeing my circle of friends for a while, which probably explains why he was talking about it (or rather, me) nonstop to his mother, Mikoto. Though, I haven't an idea why he asked me if he could be part of it. It's not as if I'm the leader…wait a second…

"Am I the leader to our group?" I have a dire question that needs to be answered. "Seriously, am I?"

"You're the reason most of us are friends," Shikamaru stated.

"Going by that logic, I believe you are indeed leader." Welp, Shino says it all.

Chapter End Notes

Updated a little later than usual, sorry about that…been a little busy. Anyways, one thing I noticed about Chōko is that she's literally the reason that Naruto has so many friends…and why everyone is friends. It's funny, if you think about it, for someone who
isn't a social butterfly to make so many friends. It's almost ironic, but not a bad ironic… it's the type of irony that Chôko would tolerate. By the by, if you're wondering about Chôko's reaction, it's because she doesn't want to be leader.

Anyways, Itachi has no idea how idea how to handle crying children, if you have noticed. Naruto stopped crying, so that's a plus! And Neji is capable of showing sympathy towards Naruto. On the subject of Neji, he's like five going on six years old. Neji might try to suppress certain emotions, but he is still a child. He can only hide what he really feels for so long, especially around Naruto. Naruto seems to have that effect on people.

And I think it's safe to say that, after this chapter, Sasuke is now part of Chôko's circle of friends. Circle of friends, circle of friends…friends are a nice thing to have, ya know. And if you're wondering about the whole "tsuntsun" thing, let me explain a thing.

Tsuntsun can basically mean aloof, pointed, angry or mean. While Chôko is usually a friendly person, she does have a tendency to act harsh when she gets defensive about herself. She never means it, though, but the fact still stands that she has a tendency to act "tsuntsun." So the fact that Neji was the one who was saying that is the reason Chôko didn't want to hear it from him…since Neji isn't the nicest person around. Neji is basically "tsuntsun" himself.

If you find this familiar, it's because this is where the term "tsundere" is derived from, a tsundere being someone who "runs hot and cold", alternating between two distinct moods: tsuntsun (aloof or irritable) and deredere (lovestruck or affectionate).

If you think about it, Chôko could be considered what TVtropes would call a Sweet Tsundere, that is to say, a tsundere with deredere as their default mood, with a violent side to them that is usually triggered under certain circumstances. I honestly think Chôko is more of a dandere, which is basically someone who is shy, but around the right person/persons, talkative and sweet. A dandere tends to feel more power in numbers. If they're with a group that they're comfortable with, then the shyness factor of said dandere will very likely decrease if another, unfamiliar person is introduced at that time. Sounds more like Chôko, no?

Well, that's enough about pointless information! I at least hope you guys found it interesting… Well, I hope you readers enjoyed this chapter! I certainly did, so until next time, everyone!
When we finished eating, Itachi brought us back to the Akimichi compound. We returned to the room where all of us had been in earlier. It was quiet…and a little awkward, if you think about it, since the adults were still in the room next door. Naruto seemed rather tense, but then Shikamaru asked him if he wanted to learn how to play shōgi.

Hinata, Shino, Chōji, Sasuke, and I sat around the shōgi board as Shikamaru taught Naruto the rules of shōgi. Itachi sat nearby us to keep a close eye on us, like the good babysitter he is. And Neji decided not to isolate himself away from us (and me)…surprisingly. He, instead, sat next to Itachi, who seemed a tad bit amused with the slight change in character the Hyuuga had.

About half an hour later, Naruto was still learning the basics of shōgi, but was getting the hang of it and doing somewhat decent against Shikamaru, who, let's be honest, was going to win, no matter what. It was around this time that the door opened and, almost reflexively, all of us turned our heads. We were all a little tense, but I think we all relaxed upon seeing Sasuke's mother, Mikoto, enter the room.

Mikoto approached us tentatively, almost afraid that any wrong move could set us off. As she neared us, Naruto tensed, having noticed that Mikoto was looking right at him. He looked at me for reassurance, since I was the reason Naruto was even here today in the first place. I was about ready to say something, but Mikoto beat me to it.

"You're Naruto-kun, aren't you?" Mikoto's tone was soft and gentle.

Naruto looked nervously at Mikoto as he timidly nodded his head.

"Okaa-san, you're not going to be mean to him, are you?" Sasuke, who had been sitting next to Naruto, inched closer to the blond-haired boy. "Are you?"

"No…I just wanted to ask him a question," Mikoto replied as she knelt down to our level. "Since Itachi's birthday is coming up, I was wondering if you would like to come over to the Uchiha compound for it…would you?"

Naruto stared agape at Mikoto. "W-Would I?"

Mikoto smiled warmly at Naruto. "Do you want to, Naruto-kun?"

"O-Of course I do, dattebayo!" Naruto was completely ecstatic, a large grin crossing his face.

Mikoto looked about ready to cry upon seeing Naruto's reaction. She excused herself and then walked out of the room. I didn't know exactly how I should feel about this, but then I remembered a small detail that I had learned about Mikoto.

Mikoto had been friends with Naruto's mother, Kushina…Kushina had her own verbal tic that was "dattebane" and hearing Naruto's "dattebayo" must have unearthed some past memories, since Kushina is, well, dead…

Oh no…
Now I just made myself sad…but at the same time, I feel happy. It's like a bittersweet feeling, just seeing how happy Naruto is, and realizing that Mikoto must have seen Kushina in Naruto. Still, the fact that Mikoto had invited Naruto over to the Uchiha compound for Itachi's birthday means that the Uchiha clan is willing to associate with the kid…to a certain extent, as far as I know. I wonder if this is a sign of change…I can only hope.

And oh, how I hope…

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Since Sasuke joined our circle of friends, you can bet that we saw an increase of Itachi's presence in our lives…whenever Itachi wasn't busy being a Genin. Naruto was all over Itachi for that, and Sasuke couldn't be any prouder. Itachi just seemed pretty neutral, if a bit amused with how Neji was slowly being dragged unwillingly into our circle of friends. I'm still leader of this circle of friends, by the way…and I really want that to change.

Of course, no one really trusts Naruto to be leader, much to his annoyance, and Hinata refused, saying that I made a better leader (which is bullshit). Chōji flat-out stated that he wouldn't be a good older brother if he took my leader status away from me…the traitor. Shikamaru said it would be too troublesome for him to be leader and Shino already accepted me as leader, using means of the insect hierarchy to explain the situation. I'm not exactly happy with his explanation, but there was no changing his mind after that…and Sasuke was pretty cool with me being leader.

You guys freaking suck!

I am friends with people who have no idea of the recklessness I am capable of…they are going to regret everything. And, unlike any other situation, I will not be laughing once they find out the hard way, because chances are, I'll be finding out the hard way as well.

At least Neji had some sense in disagreeing with everyone, but at the same time, he included his fatalism in his reasons, which I didn't want to hear and made him promptly shut up by saying his name without an honorific. That…tends to happen whenever I get annoyed or mad. It's embarrassing for me, because I can come off as rude when I do that and everyone just stares at me for it. Again, it's just embarrassing…

Naruto is at least improving academically. He's by no means a prodigy, which is, in hindsight, a good thing…he's still far behind, but he isn't completely dead-last as he was in canon. That still doesn't mean everyone has stopped picking on him (the little twerps!). In fact, no matter how much of a big deal I make over how Naruto has been improving, to everyone else (that isn't within our circle of friends), Naruto is still dead-last. I'm thinking this might be a sign of denial, since no one really wants to admit that Naruto has been improving.

Sasuke is currently at the top of our class, which is no surprise. Hinata and I are actually tied for second place, and I'm honestly surprised I'm actually doing that well… Then again, I spent a good amount of years in my past life being afraid of failure when it came to academics… It's a fear that never leaves!

It never leaves!

Shino is averagely good and Chōji is at least doing better than Naruto, as is Shikamaru…the lazy ass sloth. And from what Hinata has told me, Neji is at the top of his class, which, again, is no surprise.
Month two of kunoichi classes consisted of calligraphy. I wasn't exactly looking forward to it, but by the end of the month, I noticed an immense improvement in my writing, so I'd be lying if I said the class was a waste of time. I will say this…I am quite aware that there are cons to wearing my hair in a braid and one of those cons is having the end of the braid used as a calligraphy brush. I have no idea who did it or how they managed to get ink on my hair, as my hair isn't that long, but I have a slight suspicion that it was either Ami or one of her friends, Kasumi or Fuki.

I mean, Suzume-sensei has been putting me in the spotlight as of lately upon noticing how much I've improved. She's always had her eye on me ever since the ikebana test. Did you know that I was one of four girls who passed the ikebana test? I did that…I also scored highly, just behind Ino and Hinata, who scored the highest out of all of us. Everyone else after me did either decently (enough to pass, which only one person did, and that was Sakura) or terrible (the majority of the class). And if you want to know how I managed to score highly, I have no idea. I totally bullshitted that test, but I'm not gonna openly admit that, since I'll just piss off my classmates who didn't pass and had to take remedial lessons because of it.

In regards to the toxicology and non-toxicology of plants and flowers, everyone passed that test and I did averagely well. Not like that matters as everyone knows me as one of the girls who didn't have to take the remedial lessons for ikebana. I stood out the most because of this as Ino and Hinata had been expected to score highly, and Sakura has Ino as a friend, so again, it was only expected because of her connections with Ino. While it could be argued that I had Hinata as a friend, the fact still stands that I did better than Sakura instead of being on her level. And with Suzume-sensei putting me in the spotlight because of my improvements in calligraphy, this only makes me stand out even more.

So I have a number of girls who are jealous of me, with Ami, Kasumi, and Fuki being the most prominent of those girls. I've had girls bump into me purposely as I'm writing, therefore ruining whatever progress I had been making on my paper. I've had ink spilled on my finished calligraphy. I have even had my papers ripped up, with my progress gone to waste because of it. In all those cases, I have been forced to start over.

And the thing about calligraphy is that for any particular piece of paper, the calligrapher has but one chance, and one chance only, to create something with the brush. The brush strokes cannot be corrected, and even a lack of confidence shows up in the work, as Suzume-sensei says. She then adds that the calligrapher must concentrate and be fluid in execution. It is as difficult as it sounds.

So I guess I could say the reason for the huge spike in improvement was the result of girls forcing me to start over from scratch. It certainly seems plausible…and ironic. Not sure if I should appreciate it. I mean, on one hand, I'm doing well, but on the other hand, I'm getting picked on…and if I do badly, I'll probably never hear the end of it. Ugh, this is like the worst scenario ever…and it only adds more weight to the fear of failure. The fear just never leaves, I say!

It just gets worse...

Despite this, life continued on as usual…and on Itachi's tenth birthday, which was also turned into a gathering for the Four Noble Clans, Naruto was actually welcomed into the Uchiha compound. No one even protested. Of course, a good number of the Uchiha did look at Naruto with strained expressions and the Hyuuga avoided looking at Naruto entirely. It's not exactly much, but it's a start.

Since then, visits to the Uchiha compound have increased, with Naruto always being welcomed. By Sasuke's fifth birthday, which turned into yet another gathering (this going to be a thing, isn't it?), the strained expressions from the Uchiha lessened and the Hyuuga have started looking at Naruto. Naruto still wasn't allowed into the Hyuuga compound, which is predictable.

School remained relatively the same, with the only difference being that Naruto was still improving.
Naruto was catching up to Shikamaru, who took it as a challenge and decided to put a little more extra effort into his exams (just a little). Chōji decided to pick up the pace as well and improved as well. Both he and Shikamaru are still doing better than Naruto, who is only growing annoyed, especially since Sasuke keeps flaunting his perfect scores.

Kunoichi classes became increasingly difficult once Suzume-sensei introduced us to musical instruments. Now I'm willing to put in effort into anything remotely musical (so long as it isn't theory, because I suck at that). I've been a band geek in my past life since the fourth grade up until the day of my high school graduation, so I felt rather excited that we were learning how to play musical instruments…then I found out the learning objective for this month's course.

Each of us was assigned to a certain instrument, which is pretty cool, except guess who got the simple-looking samisen and the complicated-looking koto? I can tell you for certain, I didn't get the kokyū (Sakura did, in case you're wondering) and Hinata was lucky enough to get the simple-looking samisen, while I was stuck with the freaking koto.

The koto I was assigned was to be a thirteen-stringed koto, modified for my playing convenience. Thirteen…just looking at the number made me realize…the number thirteen is still a part of my life. From my birth, being the younger twin by about thirteen minutes, to this…it's like my past life. One way or another, I somehow end up encountering the number in my past life, whether it's my number on a softball team, or a number I encounter in video games (I'm looking at you, Kingdom Hearts), or even the year I graduated from high school… It's just a number that seems to favor me. I'm not triskaidekaphobic; I just find the number rather intriguing.

Now upon being assigned our instrument, we were given that month, plus the entirety of summer vacation (which, by the way, isn't a civilian-exclusive, so yay) to learn how to play it. We don't have to be complete professionals; we have to be decent at the very least. Suzume-sensei made sure we weren't completely blind by having other kunoichi, other than herself, to help teach us the basics. Hinata and I were taught by a kunoichi named Hotaru.

Hotaru-sensei was a very informative young lady who seemed quite pleased to see how fast Hinata and I were learning how to play our instruments. It kinda helps that Hinata's mother, Himawari, knew how to play both the koto and the samisen, and that my visits to the Hyuuga compound have recently increased because of it. I guess you can say Hinata and I sort of cheated…then again, it was never against the rules to ask for outside help, so there's that.

Still, I do not like the koto…I do not like the blisters I've been getting on my fingers (though, that's entirely my fault for misplacing my tsume—they're just so easy to lose!). I certainly do not like how much they hurt. Hinata is facing the same problem as me. In fact, most of the students are facing this problem…except for Ino, Fuki, and a couple of other students, who got the shakuhachi…the lucky punks.

The same can also be said about those who don't misplace their tsume, like me, but whatever!

_We don't talk about them, as they flaunt their non-blistered fingers!_

When everyone in the Academy was let out for summer vacation, Hinata and I were quick to discard our instruments and take a break. We freaking needed that break…and Himawari said it was fine for us to enjoy our summer vacation. She still said it was necessary for us to practice at least twice a week, so there's that…still, _freedom_!

_Sweet, sweet freedom…_

"Hey, hey, are any of you gonna go to the summer festival?" Sasuke decided to ask all of us during a
visit to the Uchiha compound. At the moment, he was playing a game of shōgi with Shikamaru… and was doing quite decently. Hinata, Shino, Naruto, Chōji, and I sat around them, watching them as they played. Itachi was stuck babysitting us and Neji was just there.

"When's that again?" Shikamaru asked as he moved a piece across the board.

"I-I think i-it's next week…" Hinata didn't seem too sure.

"It is," Neji confirmed in a somewhat curt tone. "Hinata-sama, this is something you should already know."

"Neji, Hinata and I have been busy…so excuse us if something as simple as a festival date passes any one of our minds." I want to see you try learning how to play the samisen, Neji and—I omitted the honorific, didn't I?

"Heehee." Hinata tried to stifle a couple of giggles as she looked at Neji's flustered face. "A-Are you okay, Neji-nii-sama?"

"I believe Hyuuga-san's face speaks for itself," Itachi remarked, immediately earning a glare from Neji.

"So, are you going to the summer festival?" Sasuke decided to bring our attention back to his question. "Nii-san's taking me!"

"N-Neji-nii-sama is t-taking me…" Hinata replied. "I w-want to try and w-win a goldfish…"

"Well, I don't have anything better to do, so I might as well go." Even if it means I have to wear a yukata…bluh, restricted movement… At least it's not as bad as a kimono and, thankfully, it is much lighter, too…

"I'm in!" Chōji was quick to exclaim. "Festival food is the best!"

"Guess that means I'll be going, then…" Shikamaru sighed. "Troublesome."

"I will also participate," Shino said. "I assume we will be meeting up for the fireworks display?"

"Are we, leader?" Sasuke looked questioningly at me.

"Stop calling me that!" Dammit, I want that title to fade into obscurity! "Hey, Naruto, you haven't said anything. Are you gonna go?"

Naruto blinked. "I don't know. I've never been to one and when I tried going to last year's summer festival, everyone started staring at me, so I just left. I don't think I'm wanted…it looks fun, though. Is it fun?"

…

"Wh-Why don't you s-see for yourself, Naruto-kun?" Hinata was quick ask. "I-I mean…it wouldn't be the s-same without you."

"Yeah!" Sasuke agreed. "Who else is going to lose to me in any of the games?"

Naruto scowled at Sasuke. "Like hell I'm gonna lose to you, dattebayo!"

"So then you're going?" I looked questioningly at Naruto.
"Uh…" Naruto seemed confused. "Um…"

"Your presence is required at the festival if you wish to challenge Sasuke-kun," Shino explained. "If you do not participate, then Sasuke-kun will win by default…do you wish for that to happen?"

"Hell no!" Naruto exclaimed. "I'm gonna go and kick your ass, dattebayo! You hear that, Sasuke?!"

"Loud and clear," Sasuke replied.

"I guess everyone is going, then!" Chōji grinned widely.

Shikamaru smirked when he looked at me. "So, leader…would that be a yes or no on the meet up for the fireworks display?"

"Oh, you are doing that on purpose!" I am not amused, dammit! There is nothing amusing about this, so you guys can just stop laughing—hey! "Stop laughing—you guys are the worst!"

Even Itachi is laughing and I think Neji is getting a kick out of this. What is my life? Just…what is it? Neji, I swear, you better enjoy this while it lasts, because it's not going to happen again! Of course, knowing my luck, it probably will.

C'est la vie.

Chapter End Notes

4-10-16 So like apart from edits, I also added in some information when it comes to Chōko's blisters, because I've had people tell me that with tsume (which are things you put on your fingers to play the koto), she shouldn't be getting them. Of course, this is Chōko we're talking about, and the reason she gets hers is because she keeps losing track of where she places her tsume. So yeah, that's why she's been getting blisters.

So I ended up spending some time looking at some traditional Japanese instruments and I came across the koto, kokyū, shakuhachi, and samisen. The shakuhachi is basically a flute, the samisen is a 3-stringed instrument, the kokyū is a bowed instrument, and the koto is, typically, a 13-stringed instrument (nowadays, there are koto with even more strings). Speaking of the number 13, yes, this number has popped up a number of times in my life. I find it funny.

Also, you know that feel when the teacher puts you in the spotlight because you did well on something that everyone else had trouble on? Yeah, that happened to me…the only difference between Chōko and I, is that I had confidentiality. And nothing is worse than bullshitting a test and scoring higher than a friend who studied their ass off. I'll leave it at that…

By the by, I've taken a look at the ending to Naruto and let me just say…I named Hinata's mother Himawari because the name was fitting, not because of Uzumaki Himawari! It was a total coincidence…one hell of a huge coincidence, but a coincidence nonetheless! Seriously, though…that fucking coincidence. ChibiFoxAI was the one who told me about this…she's also the friend who told me about Kushina and Mikoto, so yeah…
Moving on, one thing I'd like to point out is that Chōko hasn't noticed yet is that Naruto's friends have started taking the initiative to cheering him up, instead of just Chōko. Change is occurring, and the Uchiha clan has taken to associating with Naruto, despite his jinchuuriki status. The Hyuuga clan is slowly opening up to Naruto. And Naruto is also improving academically. It's slow, but change nonetheless.

Chōko still doesn't like being called leader, Itachi is the designated babysitter, and Neji is just there... Oh, and he's finally six-years-old. The reason I didn't go into his birthday is because nothing much really happened, it just happened. Plus, I doubt Neji would really tell anyone when his birthday was and he probably made Hinata keep it a secret. Neji is just being Neji.

Well, that's about it for this chapter, so I hope you guys enjoyed it. I keep trying to make long chapters, but I'm guessing it'll take a while before that'll happen. So until next time, everyone!
Wanna know what I don't like about playing the koto? It's the sitting position…I have to keep that stupid position (which is the correct way of seiza) as I play the damn instrument. Even though I'm getting the hang of this thirteen-stringed instrument, Himawari keeps having to correct me on my sitting position. Hinata is already used to sitting in the correct way of seiza, as that is a requirement of sorts when it comes to being a Hyuuga. And, unlike me, Hinata doesn't have to worry about playing an instrument that is on the floor, as she has to hold her samisen…the lucky girl.

By the way, did I ever mention that Himawari has been making me wear a kimono whenever I come over for koto lessons? I believe I haven't…because that is definitely a thing. Like, just a few days ago, she told me to wear my kimono the next time I came over, that time being today. If I thought sitting seiza-style was difficult enough as before, then I sure as hell was proven wrong because seiza is much more difficult while wearing a kimono. This is what happens when you're born in the Akimichi clan. For the most part, we're pretty casual in comparison to the Aburame clan, the Uchiha clan, and the Hyuuga clan. We can be quite formal when we want to be (especially to those who deserve respect), but not as often. And because of that, I am not used to being completely formal and knowing stuff like this, which is something I am probably going to learn in a kunoichi class.

Hinata, on the other hand, is the complete opposite. As I have mentioned before, she is a Hyuuga, by far the most formal of the Four Noble Clans, with the Uchiha coming in second, as they are a tad bit more lax in comparison to the Hyuuga. The Aburame are quite formal in terms of communication and mannerisms, but their appearance, in regards to clothing, is what separates them from being as formal as the Uchiha and Hyuuga. I can only assume the reason for the Akimichi clan's informality is to establish a sense of intimacy.

…I think this might be the actual reason Himawari is having me wear my kimono. She is trying to get me used to being formal. I'd appreciate it, if I wasn't learning how to do it as I play this effing koto. Seiza is pretty simple…seiza is somewhat difficult while playing the koto, but still manageable…seiza is fucking difficult while wearing a kimono and playing the koto—I have no idea how I am going to get used to this, dammit!

"It just takes some time getting used to, Chōko-chan," Himawari tried to reassure me. "The more often you do it, the easier it is to adjust."

"Hmm…" It's honestly difficult to stay mad around this woman, because Himawari is a gem. I do get what Himawari is trying to say, but at the same time, Himawari is implying that I need to practice playing the koto more often in my kimono. I don't know how to feel about this…

At least I'm not alone in this, as Hinata is currently getting her cute on with her kimono. I really love the lilac-colored obi and floral pattern she has on her mostly white kimono…

Stop getting distracted, Chōko!

"Okay, Chōko-chan, Hinata-chan…you can take a break!" Himawari told us about half an hour into the practice session. "I'll have Neji-kun bring you two some tea, so relax. Now if you'll excuse, I'll be going."

Himawari stood up and then left the room promptly. Once I was sure she was out of earshot, I let out
a loud sigh and slumped onto the tatami floor. I do not care how informal I am coming off as, especially since I am a lady (damn you, gendered etiquette!). I am exhausted and Himawari said Hinata and I could relax…and dammit, I am relaxing!

"A-Are you okay, Chōko-chan?" Hinata asked me as she set her samisen on the floor.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling as I adjusted my glasses. "Never better, Hinata… please don't tell your mother I'm doing this."

"I-I won't…" Hinata giggled. "I never told you, b-but you look nice."

I turned my head to the side to look at Hinata. "Yeah, back at you…I'm really loving your kimono."

"Th-Thank you…" Hinata blushed. "U-Um…I like your kimono, too."

I blinked and looked at my kimono. It was mostly cream in color with a vibrant green obi. It was a rather nice-looking kimono, and the ribbon Naruto had given me matched the color of my obi, but I still preferred Hinata's kimono. It's just so pretty…okay, that's enough of that!

I sat up and stretched my arms. "Ugh, I'm tired…is my hair okay?"

Mama had tied up my braid into a bun. I do not want it to come undone, because then Himawari will ask why it had happened and considering my current position of informality…yeah.

"Your h-hair is fine," Hinata replied. "Y-You should probably sit right."

I made a face. "Bluh…fine."

Might as well, in case Himawari decides to pay a surprise visit…I'll do that right after I finish stretching my legs. Seriously, stretching feels good after sitting down for so long...

"Heehee, you're like a c-cat…" Hinata covered her mouth behind her hands as she giggled.

I stopped stretching and looked seriously at Hinata. When she noticed I was staring, she stopped giggling and started stuttering… Then I said, "Nya~!" and Hinata suddenly lost it. Who knew that all it took was a simple meow to get Hinata laughing so hard…ahaha, she's so cute.

Hinata has come a long way in the past three months since she befriended me and became part of a large circle of friends. She's become a bit more confident in herself and her little stutter was starting to diminish. It was still there, but, compared to how she had been previously, there was a noticeable improvement. However, whenever Hinata was nervous or scared, her stutter tended to return with a vengeance. For the most part, Hinata has been doing well…and I couldn't be any happier.

"Wh-What's going on?" Oh hey, Neji, when did you get here and—oh crap, Hinata's still laughing! "Hinata-sama!"

"N-Neji-nii-sama?!" Hinata immediately stopped laughing, her face now a brilliant shade of red as she stared at Neji, who was currently standing in the doorway, holding a tray of tea in his hands.

Oh right, Himawari said she was going to have Neji bring Hinata and I some tea…well, oops! I should have remembered that before making Hinata laugh, now Neji is giving Hinata the look that implies that an heiress like her shouldn't being doing such and such, because he's a jealous stick in the mud who holds disdain to anyone within the Main House. I know the situation and crap, but that
still doesn't excuse Neji's treatment toward Hinata...and he wonders why Hinata has taken to messing with him as of lately.

Hinata was stuttering rather horribly. "Aaaah, N-N-Neji-nii-sama...h-have y-you greeted Ch-Chōko-chan yet?"

Looks like Hinata's using me as means of diverting Neji's gaze off of her. Welp, might as well help her out. "Hello, Neji-san!"

Neji has grown used to my presence within the last three months. That still doesn't mean he hasn't stopped being wary of me. He knows I'm capable of being spontaneous, so he always has his guard up around me. Sadly, that never seems to work whenever I omit the honorific in his name. It's almost as if he can't get over the fact that someone is saying his name without an honorific. I mean, shouldn't he be used to that due to the Academy? Not a lot of children are as polite as Hinata.

Then again, I do consider myself a special case because only I have been capable of flustering Neji, something that Hinata finds completely amusing. That may or may not be the reason Hinata has slowly started to grow comfortable with her cousin's presence. Not to say that Neji isn't still capable of making Hinata feel nervous, it's just that Hinata now has ways to cope through means of messing with her cousin. I find it hilarious.

Anyways, I was expecting to hear a strained greeting from Neji. Instead, all I got was a pair of white eyes that just stared at me. Neji's expression was completely blank and he said absolutely nothing. A minute passed and I looked at Hinata, who seemed just as confused as I was.

I think we broke Neji... "Oi, Neji! Look, I'm purposely omitting the –san—dammit, Neji, say something before I break the door!"

"Ch-Chōko-chan!" Hinata exclaimed.

"Okay, maybe breaking the door is a bit too drastic..." I mean, the last thing I need was a reason to talk with Hiashi, who will be wondering why his door was broken. I'm honestly surprised I haven't broken a door at the Hyuuga compound. I've already broken four doors at the Uchiha compound, which isn't really helping me with my goal to avoid being the next Potato Girl. "Hey, hey...Neji, did we break you? Hey!"

Bluh, it's really awkward omitting the honorific from Neji's name purposely...maybe that's why Neji isn't reacting. Well, might as well take the tray off his hands. I'm rather thirsty and cold tea is horrible.

...It took me a few seconds to get off the floor and walk over to Neji (stupid kimono, restricting my movement!). I looked at him for a moment and waved my hand in front of his face. No reaction... yeah, he was really out of it... "I'll take that!"

I proceeded to take the tray of tea from Neji's hands. After making sure I wasn't going to drop the tray that was now holding, I looked at Neji and decided to tell him something that had been on my mind recently. It's been bugging me and I'd rather say it now then blurt it out later.

"You're tall." There, I said it...I finally fucking said it. It took me this long to tell Neji something he probably knows and I didn't think it was possible for anyone to blush that hard.

"K-Kimono!" was the first word that came out of Neji's mouth.
I blinked a few times and looked at myself. "Yeah, I'm wearing a kimono. Thank you for telling me something I already know—oh, right, this is probably the first time you've seen me in a kimono, huh?

It must be a real shocker to see the girl who wears the same clothes as her twin brother, wear a kimono and look so formal. And yes, Chōji and I wear the same clothes...well, my clothes are of a smaller size than his are, but they're the same nonetheless. If it wasn't for the differences in our build, hair length, and the fact that I wear glasses, Chōji and I would look completely identical.

"D-Doesn't she look nice, Neji-nii-sama?" Hinata, what are you up to?

Neji struggled to find his voice at this point. He averted his gaze and, very quietly, said, "Yes...I need to leave."

"B-But don't you want to stay and have tea with us?" Hinata asked innocently.

Neji stiffened. "Hinata-sama...I apologize, but I must decline..."

Neji excused himself and promptly left the room.

...

"Pfft, ahahaha!" Oh my god, his reaction was priceless! "Did you see his face?!"

"I-I can't b-believe I did that!" Hinata laughed.

"You're so evil!" I love it! "Oh man, you need to do that more often!"

...

A few minutes have passed and we both eventually calmed down. By now, we were drinking tea...green tea, to be exact. I always did like myself some tea.

"So the summer festival's in a couple of days," I decided to bring up. "Are you excited?"

Hinata blinked and smiled. "Uh-huh...I'm a little worried for N-Naruto-kun, though... What if everyone is m-mean to him?"

"Then I'll break something." Vandalism isn't the way to go, but I have my limits as to how much I'll tolerate seeing my friend being mistreated. "I doubt they'll be mean to him if they see Naruto with us."

"Th-That is true..." Hinata nodded her head. "Heehee, I wonder if he is g-going to win against Sasuke-kun."

"They might end up tying, for all we know." I mean, it's certainly a possibility. "We'll see..."

"Wh-What kind of yukata will you be wearing?" Hinata decided to ask.

I thought about it for a moment. "Hmm...to tell or not to tell...I guess we'll just see on the day of the festival."

"That's f-fine..." A mischievous glint suddenly appeared in Hinata's eyes. "Do you th-think Neji-nii-sama will react the same way as he did today wh-when he sees you in a yukata?"
"I guess we'll find out." It's worth a shot.

"I-I'll make sure he sees you, then." Hinata covered her mouth behind her hands as she laughed.

The day of the summer festival was like any other day, except when Mikoto found out that Naruto didn't have a yukata, you can sure as hell bet that Mikoto took him, Sasuke, and Itachi yukata shopping. I do not envy Naruto. Yukata shopping is complete hell...at least it was for me. I mean, trying on so many yukata until Mama and I found the right one...yukata...yukata everywhere.

It's nothing like clothes shopping, where you can easily put on and take off clothes. Yukata have to be put on the right way, with the obi tied right. This is a process that has to be repeated when trying out yukata...it's just tedious.

**Don't even get me started on kimono!**

Yukata shopping aside, it was a really good day. When Chōji and I met up with our friends in the evening, they were all wearing yukata. All the boys wore dark-colored yukata, so not much variety from them...except for Shino, who didn't wear a yukata (the poor boy was too shy—how cute!). Meanwhile with Hinata and me, we got some actual color.

Hinata wore a white yukata with a colorful flower pattern and a red obi tied around her waist. I wore a green checkered-pattern yukata with a yellow obi. It was simple, nothing complex for a little kid like me. Of course, for Sasuke and Naruto, they just stared at me. Neji refused to even look in my direction, Shino said nothing, and Shikamaru actually seemed amused.

Naruto suddenly blurted out, "Holy crap, you're a girl!"

"A-Are you serious?" Tell me something I don't know for once!

Naruto sputtered. "I mean, I—I don't know!"

"You never dress like one, that's why!" Sasuke was quick to explain as he pointed his finger at me.

Shikamaru smirked. "They got you there, leader."

"Stop calling me that!" You are the worst friend ever! "And you don't have to be a girl to dress like this!"

**Clothes are clothes, dang it!**

"She's right, you know," Itachi said as he poked Sasuke in the forehead. "Remember Kōichi, Sasuke."

"But what do they have to do with this?!" Sasuke whined as he rubbed his forehead. "Kōichi just wears whatever they—oh...oh..."

...
"W-Well—Chōko never looks like this!" Sasuke gestured at me as if to prove his point.

"Y-Yeah—that's it, dattebayo!" Naruto nodded his head in agreement. "It's just so weird!"

_Why are we still on this?!

"Can we please stop talking about this?" It's just a freaking yukata…why can't you guys just be like Neji, who's just averting his gaze and staying quiet? "Please?"

"But you look nice!" Chōji—dammit, you're making me blush.

"Sh-Shut up!" You are the _worst_ brother ever!

"Your face is red," Shino said without any hesitation whatsoever, which only served to make me blush even harder.

"D-Don't look at me!" I covered my face with both of my hands.

_I'm gonna die if you guys keep this up!"

"Tsuntsun!" Sasuke exclaimed with a wide smile on his face, while Hinata burst into a fit of laughter. Even Itachi was smiling, that freaking punk!

"You guys are the _worst_!" I whined as I stomped my foot on the ground. "C'mon, let's just get some takoyaki or something—please?"

…

Shikamaru sighed loudly as he scratched the back of his head. "I think we've bothered our leader enough—let's just drop this troublesome subject."

"I-Indeed…" Neji finally managed to speak, even though he wasn't even part of the conversation.

I was too exasperated at this point to even say anything, but I'm just glad that everyone left me alone after that.

…

Deep down…I really did appreciate the attention, as flustering as it was.

_ I don't know why, I just do._

…

Fifteen minutes later, I was standing next to Neji and Shino, watching Hinata as she played the goldfish scooping game. Itachi was close by, his gaze focused on Naruto and Sasuke as they tried to outdo each other in the ring toss game. Shikamaru and Chōji were waiting in line to get shaved ice. I already got my takoyaki, so I was feeling good…

"Anything yet?" I decided to ask Hinata.

"No…” Hinata turned to me and held out her completely broken poi for me to look at. "I l-lost…”

This was the fourth time Hinata had tried and she still wasn't able to scoop a goldfish. I frowned as I looked at Hinata, who looked very dejected. I don't like it when my friends are sad…okay, that's it! I managed to stuff a few takoyaki balls into my mouth before shoving the container into Shino's hands.
I then walked over to Hinata and, after rolling up my sleeves and swallowing the takoyaki in my mouth, asked the stall keeper for a poi.

Once I got a poi, I took the bowl in Hinata's left hand and started playing the goldfish scooping game. All I had to do was use the poi to scoop a goldfish into the bowl… It sounds easy, right? Wrong! A poi is a paper scooper that can tear easily! The game requires care and speed because of that, so here I am, trying my first attempt!

Aaaand it ripped… "Another!"

I will keep on trying for Hinata!

*This is what friendship is truly about!*

…

…

After like twelve tries, I came to a sad realization…I fucking suck at this game! But I must persevere! I must be the Lambo! "Another!"

"Move over!" A curt voice said as someone pushed me aside.

"N-Neji?!” Holy shit, you're actually doing something?!

"That's Neji-san!" Neji said firmly before taking the bowl out of my hand and accepting the poi from the stall keeper. "Just stop talking."

Well, someone is a little moody today. Pfft, I doubt he'll get it on the first try and—he totally got it on the first try. Son of a bitch, I wasn't expecting that…

"N-Neji-nii-sama!" Hinata exclaimed.

Neji said nothing as he handed the bowl over to the stall keeper. A few moments later, the stall keeper handed Neji a bag filled with water, the goldfish calmly swimming inside of the bag. The goldfish was white with a little red spot in between its eyes. He picked a nice goldfish for Hinata and—oh my god, he actually did it for Hinata!

Oh my gosh, that's adorable!

"Aww, so you do love your cousin!" I was grinning widely as I gently elbowed Neji in the side. I always knew Neji had a soft spot for Hinata—aww, he's blushing!

*Oh gosh, I'm gonna melt from a cuteness overload!*

"Here you go, Hinata-sama," Neji said as he handed Hinata the bag. His face reddened even more upon seeing the smile on Hinata's face.

"Th-Thank you, Neji-nii-sama!" Hinata was very happy.

Neji scowled and looked away from Hinata, his face still very much red. "You're welcome…"

"Ah, so Hyuuga-san is also capable of being cute." Aah, Itachi, I see you've noticed Neji's random act of kindness today—and yes, he is very cute!

Neji glared at Itachi, who just looked rather amused. Looks like messing with Neji isn't just a past
time that's exclusive to Hinata and me.

"So, Itachi-san, who won the game?" I looked questioningly at the older Uchiha.

Itachi turned his attention away from Neji to look at me. "Ah, neither did… it was a tie."

"I figured." Those two were really heated, so it was only natural to assume they would tie. Course, there was a chance they wouldn't tie…but I felt as if they would.

"What are they doing now?" Shino asked.

Itachi gestured at the stall across from all of us. "Katanuki…I think they've moved up to C-rank carvings."

"Augh, it broke-ttebayo!"

"You suck, dead-last!"

"Stop calling me that, dattebayo!"

Ah, the sound of a healthy rivalry is something I never thought I would be happy to hear. For the most part, Sasuke and Naruto are pretty good friends…but when they go at it, they get rather damn competitive.

…

Sometime later, we were all in the Hyuuga compound. Hinata had said that we could get a good view of the fireworks display from here, which is honestly a plus. The nine of us (holy shit, that's a lot) seated ourselves on the veranda of the Hyuuga compound. The sky was dark and Naruto seemed rather nervous, if only because we actually snuck him into the compound. Hinata said she would take responsibility if her father caught Naruto. Neji was actually stunned with Hinata's statement, but said nothing about it.

I'm honestly surprised we managed to sneak Naruto into the Hyuuga compound in the first place. Like, holy crap, how did we do it? I may never know…but I can't help but feel as if we've done something amazing.

I mean, today was a pretty amazing day overall. Naruto had a really good time today at the festival. People did start staring at him, but upon seeing whom Naruto was among, that being two Uchiha, two Hyuuga, two Akimichi, an Aburame, and a Nara…they immediately looked away. Aww yeah, connections are definitely awesome.

Neji was surprisingly nice to his cousin for once. And to commemorate his act of kindness was a goldfish that Hinata had named Shiro. Oh man, none of us is going to be forgetting that any time soon, thanks to Shiro.

Neither Sasuke nor Naruto won against each other, as they kept tying. They still had a fun time and were quite satisfied with what they've done. Itachi seemed to have been enjoying his brother's developing rivalry with Naruto.

Shino might have not said much, but I know he had a good time. Shikamaru spent a quarter of the time mentioning my leader status (that I still refuse!) and Chōji just ate a lot…like me. We love to eat. Festival food is good.
At that moment, a firework lit up the night sky, bursting into colorful sparks of light. We all stared at the colorful sparks lighting up the sky. It was a beautiful sight to behold. After a few seconds, another firework shot up and burst into a different color of sparks.

Summer vacation has only just begun, the thought suddenly popped up in my head. There was so much left for us to do before we returned to the Academy. I could only wonder what we going to do until then. Whatever it was, I'm definitely looking forward to it.

*I'm ready.*

Chapter End Notes

4-10-16 More editing and holy shit, say hello to a Kōichi making a cameo, even though they haven't even made a physical appearance just yet in Metamorphosis (the other SI OC fic, which is where Kōichi was first mentioned by Obito). Yeah...as a reminder, any characters you see there (with the exception of the SI OC, Shiki), as well as the world building, carries over to this fic and vice versa. That's how these fics are connected.

By the by, I have yet to mention this, but the way Chōko usually has her hair up in a braid, with the ribbon, is a lot like a certain Aerith Gainsborough from Final Fantasy VII...yeah...should have mentioned this like ages ago, but there you have it!

In case anyone was wondering, seiza literally means "proper sitting" and is a term for one of the traditional formal ways of sitting in Japan. It's just a really formal way to sit. Seiza is also the traditional way of sitting while doing other arts such as calligraphy and ikebana. Chōko can sit in seiza...but she has problems doing so while she plays the koto. She has even more problems doing such while wearing a kimono.

And just to clear things up, yes, Chōko wears the same clothes as Chōji. The only differences between them, apart from gender, is the fact that Chōko has a smaller build (result of her fast metabolism), has longer hair (that is in a braid), and wears glasses. Oh, and the ribbon Naruto gave her is green.

Hinata has also started developing a mischievous side to her character, with Neji becoming more expressive. Let's just say, because of Chōko and Hinata, Neji now has trouble controlling his emotions around them. Itachi finds this extremely amusing, much to Neji's annoyance because he already has to put up with two girls who like to mess with him.

Neji has also shown that, despite his treatment of Hinata, he does have a soft spot for her. It's small, but definitely there. Part of the reason that came to be about was because Hinata has started messing with him. The interactions that came from what Hinata has done harbored a bit of a bond.

Then there's Naruto and Sasuke, the two are usually friendly...but when they get competitive, then damn. It's a pretty healthy rivalry there. Sasuke is the way he is because he's still young. He still has his family, but he also has a lot of friends. His relationship with his brother is strong, and because of that, Itachi's been interacting with Sasuke's friends.
It's just something I'd point out, but that's about it. I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, because I sure did! Also! The chapter is longer than the other ones I have written! At least I hope it is, but still! Potentially longer chapter! It's a small start, but it's a freaking start! I'm hoping this will continue for future chapters.

I also failed to mention I made it past ten chapters, which is the start of one milestone. The next one is getting this story over twenty chapters. Façade has been, as of yet, the only story I've gotten past twenty chapters and then some! In fact, Façade is one chapter away from hitting fifty…I am happy.

Welp, until next time, everyone!
"Kagome kagome,
The bird in the cage,
When, oh, when will it come out?
In the evening of the dawn,
The crane and turtle slipped.
Who stands right behind you now?"

If someone were to have told me I would one day be playing *Kagome Kagome* with a bunch of children, I wouldn't have believed them. Yet, here I am, playing just that with my circle of friends. Naruto was currently the oni in the center of the circle. He had his eyes covered and, upon hearing that we had stop singing, he started guessing whom it was that stood behind him.

"Umm…Neji-san?" he guessed.

…

Wow, Naruto actually guessed right. Neji certainly didn't looked too pleased. Of course, the only reason Neji was even playing in the first place was because Hinata somehow managed to convince him. It did help that Hinata also had Itachi to help. Itachi, by the way, is also playing.

After Neji and Naruto switched places, Neji covered his eyes while we started singing as we circled around him.

"Kagome kagome,
The bird in the cage,
When, oh, when will it come out?
In the evening of the dawn,
The crane and turtle slipped.
Who stands right behind you now?"

The song's pretty creepy when you've gone into some of the theories of what its origin and meaning really is. If anything, it might have just usurped Ring Around the Rosie for most disturbing children's game. That may just be my opinion, though…

"Uchiha-san…?" Neji guessed.

"Which one?" Shikamaru asked. "There are two."

Neji scowled. "Itachi-san…"
"Ah, you finally said my name." Itachi nodded his head. "Does this mean I can call you Neji-san?"

Only Itachi would take this opportunity to move onto a first-name basis with Neji.

You sly dog!

"Do whatever suits you." Neji scowled. "Was I correct?"

"Nope!" Sasuke exclaimed. "Wrong Uchiha, Neji-san! You're still the oni!"

Neji was not happy, but said nothing about it. We started singing again as we circled around Neji, the process being repeated a few times, with Neji guessing the wrong person each time. Around the sixth time we circled around Neji, I started noticing something was off about him.

Is he...is he okay?

On the seventh time, I looked closely at Neji as we started to sing. I saw him visibly twitch upon hearing us start. He must've not liked our singing... Come the tenth time, I was able to confirm that Neji was slowly growing distressed each time we sang as we circled around him. His voice was starting to grow a tad bit desperate each time he guessed. At first, I just thought Neji didn't want to play at all, that he hated our singing, but that was not the case...

It's more than that, but what—I don't know...

Around the sixteenth time, Hinata cried out when she saw that Neji was actually crying. When he had started crying, I don't know, but it was disturbing that he was trying to hide the fact that he was crying.

Neji, you don't do stuff like that—you need to tell us if something is wrong!

We're here for you!

We all stopped holding hands and knelt down to Neji's level. Neji tried to look away from us, but Hinata refused to let her cousin hide. She was adamant about his wellbeing, as much as he tried to push her away.

"N-Neji-nii-sama...are you okay?" Hinata wanted to know—no, she needed to know.

Neji remained silent, tears continuing to stream down his cheek as he bit down on his lip.

"Neji-nii-sama..." Hinata said in a firmer tone. "Answer me."

Hinata startled all of us with her firm tone and lacking stutter. She meant business and even Neji knew that, and yet...he was having trouble answering his cousin. He had such difficulty even saying anything coherent, as all that came out of his mouth was a jumbling mess of words. It took him a moment before he finally replied, in a steady, but shaky voice, "The bird in the cage...when, oh, when will it come out?"

He choked back a sob.

"N-Neji-nii-sama..." Hinata frowned as she placed her hand on Neji's shoulder.

Neji twitched visibly. "D-Don't...touch...me..."

At that moment, Itachi pulled Hinata out of the way of Neji's palm strike, which would have struck Hinata right in the chest. Did...Neji just try to...hurt Hinata? Oh hell no...you have crossed a line,
"What the hell, Neji?!" I yelled, about ready to lunge at the boy. Of course, Itachi decided he didn't like my somewhat offensive stance and grabbed me by the back of my haori, pulling me as far as he could, away from Neji. "H-Hey!"

"Calm down, Chōko-san…" Itachi said coolly. "Violence will get us nowhere."

Dammit, why do you have to be right? "Tch, fine…"

Thank you, though…seriously, thank you…

Since Neji was currently acting hostile to anyone who got near him, Itachi decided to take matters into his own hands. Itachi made all of us distance ourselves from Neji as he walked closer to the Hyuuga, as carefully as he could. Neji was trying his hardest to stop crying, choking back sobs every few seconds or so, but he couldn't.

When Itachi tried to approach Neji, Neji nearly struck him in the chest with another palm strike. Except, unlike with Hinata, Neji's Byakugan was activated and he had tried to use the Jūken on Itachi. Itachi was quick to dodge, but Neji kept attacking, to which Itachi kept evading.

Oh my god!

Naruto, Sasuke, Hinata, Chōji, Shikamaru, Shino, and I spent the next few minutes watching the scene before us. Neji kept trying to land a hit on Itachi, but Itachi was just too fast. Ten minutes had passed before Itachi formed a hand seal and said something so quickly that I couldn't make out what he had said.

Within seconds, puffs of smoke gave way to three identical clones of Itachi. This caught Neji completely by surprise, leaving himself open for a very brief moment. Itachi was quite quick to use the opening he had as a chance to have his clones apprehend Neji. They were shadow clones, as shown by the fact they were corporal. With Neji detained by shadow clones, the real Itachi walked up to the Hyuuga and knocked him out. Almost immediately, Itachi's clones dispersed.

Itachi caught Neji as he fell. With Neji no longer being a threat, Itachi turned to face us, his gaze falling upon Hinata, who seemed absolutely horrified with what she had to witness.

"You…you know something, don't you?" Itachi asked Hinata.

Hinata bit her lip. "…"

...

Several minutes later, under a big, shady tree, Hinata began telling us everything about the Hyuuga Main Family's Juinjutsu. About how the seal is branded on all Branch House members in the Hyuuga clan—Neji included. That was the reason why Neji kept his forehead covered at all times—because of that seal.

"N-Neji-nii-sama was branded when I turned three…" Hinata explained.

"So he's had the seal since then?" Sasuke asked.

Hinata nodded her head. "Y-Yes…"
"Why do you need a mark to distinguish the Main and Branch families?" Naruto questioned. "What's the use of that?"

"I-It's not just for show…" Hinata looked down. "A M-Main House member can activate it using a hand seal to d-destroy the wearer's brain cells."

"Oh god…" I had nearly forgotten how horrible the Branch House had it. Sure, I have been holding it against Neji, but only because he didn't need to take it out on Hinata for it…

"The s-seal will only disappear after death, sealing up the ability of the Byakugan along with it," Hinata continued. "The Branch family is meant to protect the Main family…th-that's why Neji-nii-sama is always with me."

"So this seal…what does it look like?" Itachi asked.

"I don't kn-know…" Hinata replied. "When I asked N-Neji-nii-sama, he said…the c-curse of the mark is meant to represent 'a bird in the cage'."

A bird in the cage…oh shit!

"The bird in the cage, when, oh, when will it come out?" Shikamaru suddenly brought up. "Neji-san must have not liked hearing that part of the song."

"I feel bad…" Chōji remarked. "He was playing with us, even though the song was bothering him…"

"I-It's my fault," Hinata stated. "I-I convinced him to p-play…"

"Do not blame yourself, Hinata-san," Shino tried to reassure Hinata. "How were you to know he would react in this manner?"

…

"You don't know, do you?" Shino had made a point.

Hinata shook her head. "N-No…but I do kn-know it's my fault Neji-nii-sama's father is dead."

Oh god, not this incident—wait, Hinata's blaming herself? No wonder she has self-esteem issues! "How would that be your fault?!"

"If I d-didn't nearly get kidnapped, then my father w-wouldn't have killed the Head Ninja of Kumogakure!" Hinata was adamant about accepting the blame. "I-If that hadn't happen, then Hizashi-sama wouldn't have had to take my father's place when Kumogakure demanded my father's body! The only r-reason that even happened was because they were t-twins and Hizashi-sama was a member of the Branch family! So, e-essentially, it is my fault."

Wow, I never thought Hinata would be one to talk this much when she's adamant about something… I think I learned something new about my soft-spoken friend. No, it's not just me, but also all of us… Is this what Hinata's been dealing with since the incident? Goddamn, I feel so bad for her…that's a lot for a four-year-old to be handling…

"Hinata…how long ago was this?" I need to make sure, before I say something I might regret.

"Almost two years ago…" Hinata answered. "Why?"

"Wouldn't that make you like three-years-old at the time?" Sasuke looked questioningly at Hinata.
"Hey, hey…aren't you still four?"

"…" Hinata looked down and said nothing.

Hinata was pretty much the youngest out of all of us. Excluding Itachi and Neji, Shino was the oldest out of all of us.

"I'm still four!" Naruto exclaimed.

"We're not talking about you, dead-last!" Sasuke snapped.

"Stop calling me that-ttebayo!" Naruto scowled at Sasuke.

"Both of you, shut it!" You two can be bickering rivals some other time! Right now, Hinata needs some moral support because she is blaming herself for something she should not be at fault for.

"Shikamaru, if you say anything, I will smack you."

I know he's still four years old as well, but I didn't want to hear it right now.

"I wasn't going to say anything." Shikamaru made a face. "How troublesome…"

"S-So what does being four have to do w-with anything?" Hinata was confused.

"I'm just saying…you're still pretty young," Sasuke replied. "Right, Nii-san?"

Itachi nodded. "That is correct."

"B-But…" Hinata began.

"Hinata-san, know your limits," Shino said firmly.

…

"Fine…" Hinata sighed in defeat. "Y-You win…"

"So…what are we going to do about Neji-san?" Chōji looked at Neji, who was currently passed out on the grass.

"He's gonna be a bit mad at us, isn't he?" Sasuke frowned.

"Correction: He's going to be mad at me, not you," Itachi remarked. "I was the one who knocked him out."

"P-Please don't tell anyone that Neji-nii-sama nearly attacked me!" Hinata was quick to say. "H-He'll get in trouble with my father…"

"Speaking of your father, you two need to have a talk with him," Shikamaru suggested. "If Neji-san's having issues like this, then he needs to talk it out with his father's twin brother."

Way to go, Shikamaru, doing something that actually displays your actual intelligence instead of slacking off!

"So I guess it's safe to say that, after this, we are no longer playing Kagome Kagome, correct?" I looked questioningly at everyone. "Well?"

"I never really liked the game, anyways." Shikamaru rubbed the back of his head. "It's too
troublesome…"

"And hard!" Naruto added.

Sasuke nodded his head. "There are too many of us, that it makes the game difficult!"

"There is a limit to how challenging a game could be," Shino noted.

"We're better off playing ninja," Chōji commented. "It's more fun than Kagome Kagome."

"I-I feel the same way," Hinata agreed.

"You guys were the ones who suggested we play it..." I didn't even want to play it because I found the song creepy...thank you, Vocaloid and morbid theories about the song's origin! I will never see this game the same way ever again. "You know what, I'm not even gonna argue...so it's settled! We're never playing that game again!"

You know, for someone who refuses to be leader, you actually make a pretty good one."

"You say that now, but just you wait!" I will fuck up badly one day and make everyone realize how bad of a leader I can be! You guys will regret everything!

About half an hour later, Neji woke up. He was a bit disoriented, but relatively fine overall. When Hinata tried talking to him, Neji looked away, possibly in shame. Frowning, Hinata decided to take a more active role and lunged at her cousin, wrapping her arms around his frame in a tight hug. This caught Neji completely by surprise. He stiffened, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

"I'm so sorry, N-Neji-nii-sama!" Hinata apologized frantically. "I-It's all my fault th-this happened!"

"Wh-What?" was all Neji could say. Before Neji could do anything else, Naruto latched onto him in the same manner Hinata had done. "G-Get off!"

"Neji-saaaaan!" Naruto whined. "You don't have to hide it anymore!"

"I'm not...I'm not hiding anything!" Neji was slowly growing annoyed with the physical contact coming from his cousin and Naruto.

"Don't lie!" Sasuke exclaimed as he joined Naruto and Hinata as they continued to hug Neji.

Pretty soon after that, the rest of us started hugging Neji as well. What was initially supposed to have been a single hug turned into a group hug, one that Neji had no interest, whatsoever, in partaking...at all.

"There is no escape!" You are gonna be part of this group hug, whether you like it or not!

C'mon, man, we're here for you!

Please...don't push us away!
"Do you not wish to accept our platonic affections?" Shino asked. "Isn't it customary for friends to embrace one another when one is emotionally hurting?"

"F-Friends?!!" Neji exclaimed, his eyes widening. "Since…when—since when…are you my friends?!"

Neji, are you serious?!

"Now, now, Neji-san," Itachi said as he joined in on the group hug. "We are only concerned for the well-being of our friend."

"I-Itachi-san?!" Neji was baffled.

"Ah, you said my name again…" Itachi said in a slightly amused tone. "See? We have started referring to each other by our first names. Surely that is meant to signify something?"

"Y-You are doing this on purpose!" Neji yelled, his face turning a bright shade of red.

"Of course I am," Itachi admitted as a small smile formed on his lips. "We are friends."

By now, Neji's anger was starting to fade as he began growing emotional. He was having trouble breathing, his eyes glistening with unshed tears as he choked back a couple of sobs. He tried to hide it, but after hearing Itachi's remark, he started bawling.

"I-Is he supposed to be doing that?" Chōji asked, sounding rather concerned.

"He's finally opening up instead of suppressing his emotions," Shikamaru pointed out. "I'm sure you've noticed."

"H-He does that…" Hinata said softly. "I-It's okay, Neji-nii-sama, we're here for you."

I nodded my head. "Yeah, we're here for you—and don't you forget it!!"

Neji seemed to cry even harder after hearing that.

It hurts.

My head hurts.

Everything hurts.

But it's going to be okay.

It's going to be fine—right?

"It's going to be fine," Itachi reassured, having heard me ask a question that should have stayed in my head. "Because we are friends."

Yeah…that's right…

Thank you…
We all saw a different side of Neji today, one that I, and everyone else, could have never predicted. It still scared me that he nearly hurt Hinata. I have never been so glad to have Itachi around us. At the same time, I was actually concerned for Neji. I think it's safe to say that all of us were.

When Hinata and Neji left us, Hinata was holding onto Neji's hand as he continued to sniff and cry. That was the first time I've actually seen them hold hands—and the first time that Neji actually acted his own age. That was the last any of us had seen of them for this week, because after that, Hinata and Neji stayed home.

I was worried at first…then Chōji mentioned my koto lessons with Himawari, to which Shikamaru suggested I use that chance to check up on Hinata and Neji. Naruto and Sasuke wished me good luck, Itachi did the same, and Shino told me to take care.

So as I made my way to the Hyuuga compound, my pace somewhat slower than usual due to the fact that I was wearing my kimono, I thought about what could have happened during the past few days Hinata and Neji hadn't come out to play with us. I wondered quite briefly if Hinata had followed through Shikamaru's suggestion regarding her and Neji talking with Hiashi. It would have explained their recent absence…

Though, when I approached the Hyuuga compound, Hinata was outside, waiting for me. She was also wearing her kimono, so that meant lessons with Himawari were still on. Upon seeing me, Hinata ran up to me as fast as she could in her kimono. She grabbed onto my hand and started pulling me towards the Hyuuga compound. When I tried asking her what was going on, she shushed me.

"J-Just follow me," was all she told me. "Y-You need to see this…"

I was confused at first as to what she wanted me to see…but then I saw it. Within a room, the training room most likely, Neji was sparring with Hiashi. The two had yet to notice our presence in the room, which is what Hinata had been going for. I honestly was surprised with the scene before us.

Like…holy shit. This feels like something that should happen in the future, not now…what the hell happened—oh crap. Didn't Shikamaru tell Hinata that she and Neji needed to talk with Hiashi? Then, with what had happened…did Hiashi tell Neji the truth? That seems highly plausible, considering that Hiashi and Neji were currently sparring with each other.

"Chōko-chan, l-let's go…" Hinata whispered to me.

I nodded my head and followed after Hinata as we left the room.

…

Himawari was waiting for us, somewhat impatiently. She scolded us lightly for what we did, but then proceeded to tell us to take up our positions. I usually leave my koto at the Hyuuga compound so I don't have to lug it around with me everywhere. Of course, I can store it in a scroll, but considering how often I lose my tsume…it's better this way, so I don't end up losing that scroll. It's not as if it's that heavy to begin with…well, it is, but it's not a problem for me. It's just an inconvenience, just having to carry that thing around.

Lessons with Himawari proceeded as usual, with me having my sitting position corrected by Himawari every other moment or so. Seriously, how the hell am I going to get used to this? Ugh, I hate this freaking koto…
About an hour into the lesson, Himawari gave us a well-deserved break and left the room. As she left the room, I noticed something off about her. Hinata must have noticed that I was staring, because the next thing she said caught me by surprise.

"I'm going to be an older sister soon," was what she said.

I turned to Hinata. "Wh-What?"

Hinata smiled. "I've been meaning to tell you."

"So your mother..." Himawari is—no wonder she seemed a bit rounder around the stomach! I was quick to hug Hinata. "Congratulations, Hinata!"

Hinata blushed. "Th-Thank you..."

That meant Hanabi was going to be born in...March, if I'm correct. So Himawari is close to two months pregnant, then. Huh, I wonder how that is going to turn out...ahaha, Hinata is going to be an older sister. She certainly seems happy.

"Am I interrupting something?" Hello Neji, didn't see you there and—you seem oddly calmer. His expression certainly seemed softer...and it seems that Himawari put him on tea-bringing duty again.

"N-Neji-nii-sama!" Hinata exclaimed. "I was just telling Chōko-chan about how I'm going to be an older sister!"

Neji blinked and nodded. "Ah, I see...tea?"

"Th-That would be fine!" Hinata smiled. "Hey, Neji-nii-sama...w-would you like to stay and have tea with us?"

Neji stiffened again. I was expecting him to decline like last time, but instead, he actually said, "Only for a short while."

And that was how Neji sat with us as we drank tea. Himawari must have wanted Neji to stay with us, assuming from the fact that there were three cups instead of two on the tray. Neji still refused to look at me, which is nothing out of the usual. The only difference was that, instead of staying quiet, Neji tried to join in our conversation. He was a bit awkward about it, but he was trying.

"It's nice to see you being more social!" I smiled at Neji. He really deserves a gold star for trying!

Neji looked away, probably not knowing how to react to my comment.

"Heehee..." Hinata giggled. "He's sh-shy!"

Oh man, if that isn't the most ironic thing I have ever seen and heard!

...Since that day, Hinata and Neji returned to our circle of friends. Upon returning, Neji found himself being swarmed by Naruto and Sasuke. Itachi just patted Neji on the head when Neji tried to pull Naruto and Sasuke off of himself. Chōji offered some potato chips to Neji, which Neji politely declined. Shikamaru made it a point that, by even offering potato chips to him, Chōji had considered Neji a friend. This caused Neji to blush, his blush growing even worse when Shino made it clear that we have missed him in his and Hinata's absence.

"Th-Thank you..." was all Neji managed to say.
Smiling, I walked over to Neji and smacked a gold star sticker over his forehead. Neji did not appreciate the act, but said nothing. I just laughed and held out the packet of gold star stickers I had bought the other day at a shop.

"I got these for you!" Really, I did. "Every time I think you deserve a sticker, I'll give it to you!"

"Did you have to put it on my forehead?" Neji looked sternly at me.

"I...don't know..." I wasn't really thinking. "S-Sorry..."

"It's fine," Neji huffed. "Uzumaki, Sasuke-san—get off!"

After Itachi decided he had seen enough of his little brother and Naruto messing with Neji, he pulled them off the Hyuuga. Neji gave out a quiet, "Thank you" before adjusting his clothes.

"Nice sticker," Itachi remarked. "How do you feel, Neji-san?"

Neji glared at Itachi, who just smirked at him.

...

After our reunion with Hinata and Neji, our summer days seemed to be more fun-filled than ever, now that Neji was trying to be more social instead of reluctant to interact. It was safe to say that he was an official member of our circle of friends (not that he wasn't before, but now he's aware he's part of this). I tried passing on the title of leader onto him, but Neji refused, saying that he had changed his mind about me.

I...was not expecting that. None of us had been expecting that...except for, maybe, Itachi, based on how amused he had seemed. He reiterated an earlier statement he had once told me about being a good leader and I just told him to shut it. Despite my mixed feelings, I smacked another gold star on Neji's forehead. Neji didn't really appreciate it, but I felt like he deserved it—for trying to change.

...

As we were watching the clouds, with our backs laid against the grass, on one particularly cloudy afternoon, Naruto started talking to Neji.

"If you don't like the way the Hyuuga have treated you, then I'll change them," is what he told Neji. "I'll change the Hyuuga when I become Hokage!"

What was stunning about Naruto's statement was that was the first time he had ever mentioned to us about his dream of becoming Hokage. It's honestly strange, but...somehow not surprising. I was expecting to hear that from Naruto eventually...I just didn't know when.

Itachi was rather supportive of Naruto, as was Sasuke. Shikamaru was a bit sarcastic, but otherwise, just as supportive as well.

"You're gonna need an advisor, though," Shikamaru remarked.

"Huh...you're right..." Naruto sat up and looked at Shikamaru, smiling widely as he did. "That's why you'll be my advisor!"

Shikamaru sighed loudly in exasperation, but was unable to stop the smile that had crossed his expression all of a sudden. "How troublesome..."

"But you didn't deny it!" Chōji was grinning widely.
"I feel left out…" Shino suddenly said.

"Well, what do you want to be?" I decided to ask Shino.

"I want to discover and tame new species of insects," Shino replied. "I also want to be there, when the day comes that Naruto-kun becomes Hokage."

"Thanks Shino!" Naruto appreciated Shino's support. "I hope you find a lot of bugs!"

Hinata laughed. "G-Good luck with that—b-both of you!"

"Heeey—summer vacation is almost over…" Sasuke suddenly said. "What do you think we'll be learning when we get back?"

"Possibly about hand seals," Itachi suggested. "You learned those first before you start working on any ninjutsu and genjutsu."

"Hey, hey, speaking of ninjutsu…what was that technique you used on Neji-san?" Naruto asked Itachi.

"Kage Bunshin no Justu," Itachi replied.

"Hey, hey…can you teach me how to use it-ttebayo?" Naruto looked expectantly at Itachi with a wide smile. "Eh, eh, yes or no?"

Itachi chuckled. "I'll teach you when you're older."

"No fair, Nii-san!" Sasuke whined. "You gotta teach me too."

"You need to work on your Katon Goukakyuu no Jutsu first before anything." It is nice seeing Itachi acting like the older brother he is. "Can you promise me that?"

Sasuke sat up and glared at Itachi briefly before sighing. "Fiiiine…"

"Hey, Neji-san…what do you think?" I haven't heard Neji say anything in a bit.

…

"Neji-san?" I sat up to get a good look at Neji…he was asleep. "Ah, he's asleep."

"He m-must've been tired…Neji-nii-sama and my father have been t-training together as of lately," Hinata remarked.

"Hey, he's smiling, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaimed.

…

…

Summer soon came to an end and we returned back at the Academy. Classes resumed, as did kunoichi classes. The moment of truth involving our musical instruments came and…everyone passed. Suzume-sensei was quite glad and continued with the next lesson, which was singing.

This was when things started taking an ugly turn as, when singing lessons first began, it was revealed that one of Ami's friends, Fuki, had a hearing disability (I don't know the exact details, but it's not really any of my business to pry into the lives of others). Fuki had been hiding it for quite some time,
but her secret came out when Suzume-sensei had tried getting her to sing. Fuki's singing was quite off-key and, when she tried to talk, she had a bit of a speech impediment as she paused between words and sometimes, she stuttered. It had taken me until then to realize that Fuki rarely ever spoke and the reason being was because of that.

Some of the girls in class had started making fun of Fuki for it, having decided to take their attention off of me for once. While I'm glad some girls have decided to stop picking on me, I wasn't exactly happy with whom they decided to pick on and for what reason exactly. Even if Fuki did pick on me, as Kasumi and Ami did, that did not mean I wanted her to go through the same thing as me. It was just so fucked up—the girls were picking on her because of her hearing difficulties and speech impediment.

That's so fucked up!

You don't do that—you just don't!

It went on for nearly a week until Ami finally had enough. Ami got into a fight with a girl name Sayuri, who had decided it would be "okay" to openly insult Fuki, just because "she wouldn't be able to hear" her. I saw a different side of Ami that day…and since then, Ami and her friends have stopped picking on others. Ami, from time to time, does act up, but not in the way she used to.

Not anymore—not after that.

Kunoichi classes aside, Itachi had been right about hand seals. That was what we were learning and we would keep learning about them until we had them completely memorized. Hoo boy, I had issues with this at first. I wanted to go to Itachi for help, but Neji got to me instead. Apparently, Hinata had told him to help me with my hand seals because I was having trouble. I was honestly surprised that Neji had even followed through with what Hinata had said because he was still rather wary of me. I counted this as Neji wanting to change, so after he had finished helping me, I slapped another gold star sticker onto his forehead…for being a good friend.

Neji still wasn't amused, but he said nothing.

Shikamaru's birthday came and went by. Nothing significant happened there, as we treated as a usual day at the Nara compound. Then, by the end of the month, during one particular lunch break, I got tackled by a boy with messy brown hair, tan skin, and red markings on his cheeks not unlike those of San from *Princess Mononoke*.

"Hey, hey, you're leader, right?" he asked me while our faces were literally centimeters apart, his sharp black eyes staring directly into my brown eyes.

I blinked a few times, needing a moment to gather my thoughts, and scowled before kicking the boy off of me. "I am not!"

The boy landed back a few feet away from me. I took this time to adjust my glasses and clothes… before getting tackled again by the boy (this boy has no concept of personal space!). Around this time, Sasuke and Naruto decided to stop watching and got the boy off of me. I glared at the boy as he smiled sheepishly at me.

"The hell was that for?!" Not cool, dude, not cool—I was eating!

"Let me into your group!" the boy demanded as a fanged grin crossed his face. "My name is Inuzuka Kiba!"

I blinked again and looked at Chōji, Shikamaru, and Hinata. They all shrugged, saying that it was up
to me whether or not I should let Kiba into the group…the traitors! I seriously wasn't expecting Kiba, of all people, to want to join our group…yet, by the end of the day, Kiba joined our circle of friends.

One thing about Kiba that makes him different from everyone else is that he does want to be leader…except he’s not accepting the position right away when I suggested it to him. No—oh no, he’s fighting for dominance over it, so unless I lost against him, I would stay as leader. I, for one, don’t like losing easily (I am many things, but a loser is not one of them!) and with the way Kiba keeps initiating a fight, I’d rather not lose…or prolong the fight, as I do not want to accidentally hurt Kiba with my strength.

... 

I'm never going to get rid of this title, am I?

...

...

With Kiba having joined our circle of friends, you can bet that whatever sense of quietness and tranquility went out the window as Kiba introduced a sense of energy that wasn't there previously. If Kiba and I weren't fighting, then he and Naruto were, because it turned out, they have the same dream of becoming Hokage. Sasuke wasn't exactly happy with this because he felt that Naruto was his rival and it was just hilarious. Itachi certainly found it amusing.

Then Kiba found out about the stickers I gave Neji and wanted one as well, so I had to go buy another set of stickers for him. So while Neji got gold stars, Kiba got paw prints. Kiba was quite pleased with his stickers and actually started doing little things to get them, that being, "Don't fight with Chōko while she's eating." I am quite happy he's doing that a lot.

During a visit to the Inuzuka compound, in which Kiba wanted us to meet his mother and older sister, we found out that Naruto's birthday was coming up. Naruto said he wanted to take us somewhere on his birthday, that we had to be ready for it.

When Chōji and I got home that day, I was quick to run up to Mama and suggest an idea I had involving Naruto's birthday. Father was told about this and he was quick to send the message to the rest of the Four Noble Clans, and the Nara clan. I have no idea what they were planning, but they told Chōji and I to keep Naruto busy on the day of his birthday until the evening, which was when we were supposed to bring him to the Akimichi compound.

As Naruto was already taking us somewhere that day, keeping him busy until the evening wasn't going to be a problem. It was a school day (a non-kunoichi class day at that) as well, so really, it wouldn't be too difficult keeping Naruto busy.

...

On the day of his fifth birthday, Naruto, with help from both Neji and Itachi, managed to sneak all of us into the Hokage's office. Sarutobi Hiruzen, the Sandaime, had been doing paperwork when we had entered the room. Sarutobi arched his eyebrow at the sudden increase of people in his office.

"Hey, hey, Jiji!" Naruto called out to Sarutobi. "Look at how many friends I've made!"

Sarutobi looked over each and every one of us, looking rather impressed with the friends Naruto has made. He must have noticed that there were two Uchiha, two Hyuuga, two Akimichi, an Aburame, a Nara, and an Inuzuka in the room, based on how stunned he looked at the moment.
"You've sure made a lot of friends, Naruto," Sarutobi remarked. "Oh, and how has your birthday been?"

"It's been fine...hey, are you gonna take us out to Ichiraku Ramen?" Naruto looked expectantly at Sarutobi. "Like you usually do on my birthday?"

A strained expression crossed Sarutobi's face. "I'm sorry, Naruto...I'm very busy today."

Naruto looked absolutely crestfallen. "Jiji..."

"You know what, I guess I can put aside all this work for you and your friends." Sarutobi smiled at Naruto. He stood up from his seat and walked out from behind his desk. "Let's get going, shall we?"

I'm pretty sure Teuchi and Ayame were expecting to see that the Sandaime visit Ichiraku Ramen today, based on the fact that it was Naruto's birthday. As it was Naruto's birthday, Teuchi gave all of us discounts and a free extra-large bowl of miso ramen with roasted pork fillet for Naruto. Naruto was quite happy today. Of course, there was still much more for him to see when we take him to the Akimichi compound later.

Sometime later, in the evening, after the Sandaime had gone his separate way, Chōji and I led everyone to the Akimichi compound. Naruto had no idea what was going on as we rarely ever went to the Akimichi compound this late. He had tried asking us if anything was wrong, but his question went unanswered. Upon bringing everyone to a dark room in the Akimichi compound, Naruto asked us again if anything was wrong. At that moment, the lights flickered on and Naruto received the biggest surprise in his life.

"Happy birthday!" Chōji and I yelled simultaneously.

Naruto stared wide-eyed at the amount of people in the room. Aside from my family, Himawari and Hiashi were there, as was Shino's father, Shibi (his mother is currently on a mission and out of Konoha, so she's absent). Mikoto and Fugaku were predictably present, with Mikoto smiling warmly at Naruto. Shikaku and Yoshino were also there, as was Iruka-sensei, himself.

"Wh-What?" Naruto was practically speechless.

"It was Chōko's idea," Chōji was quick to out me, even though I wanted to stay anonymous. "Kaa-chan and Tou-chan called everyone else..."

"I-I told Iruka-sensei since he and you are close..." Hinata admitted.

"Wh-Why is everyone here?" Naruto was still having a hard time processing what he was seeing. Mikoto had answered Naruto's question. "Because we didn't wish for you to be alone today."

"Alone..." Naruto repeated, his eyes widening. "I'm not alone..."

"That is correct," Shino remarked.

"I haven't known you for long, but I do consider you a friend," Kiba confessed to Naruto. "I'll be sure to invite you and everyone else over for my birthday...what do you say?"

"Ah...aaaahhh..." Naruto's eyes began to glisten with unshed tears. "I'm not alone..."
Upon saying that, Naruto started crying. Unlike the last time, during the day Chōji and I turned five…Naruto’s tears were of happiness, not sorrow. He was just so happy that people would even do something like this for him.

Iruka-sensei smiled and walked over to Naruto to give him a friendly hair ruffle. "You should be happy…to have so many friends."

"I am-ttebayo…" Naruto sobbed. "Th-Thank you so much, dattebayo…"

Later into the evening, the Sandaime paid the Akimichi compound a visit, because he had finished his work. Iruka-sensei had told Sandaime about a birthday gathering for Naruto at the Akimichi compound. This managed to make Naruto cry for a second time today.

…

The month went by as usual after that. Naruto was much more energetic after that day. He was smiling much more often, as if that was even possible. He still had difficulties every once in a while, like his classmates picking on him, even though he was average as can be in class. Even though Sasuke called him dead last, Naruto really only tolerated the name if it came from Sasuke.

Kunoichi classes switched from singing to proper etiquette. I did somewhat horribly because I sounded a bit too "boyish" for Suzume-sensei's tastes. This is what happens when I grow up with someone as Chōji as a twin brother. I picked up his speech patterns…and because of that, Suzume-sensei kept telling me to sound a little more feminine. And it was thanks to that class that I now have two ways of speaking. There is my usual speaking manner, and then there's my more feminine, polite manner. It's…weird.

Regular classes were still focused on academics, as usual. We were still focusing on hand seals and gym class started turning a bit more strenuous now that we have mostly adjusted to it. Nothing much else happened after that. This continued onto the next month.

At least kunoichi classes had some variety… Of course, we started learning about cultures, which was going to last through this month, all the way up until we were released for winter vacation (so close, yet so far…). We were going to be quizzed on that when we returned from the break. I already went up to Hinata for help upon hearing about that.

Come Hinata’s fifth birthday, it appeared that the Hyuuga had finally accepted Naruto, from the fact that he was allowed into the Hyuuga compound. When Hinata had also given Naruto an invitation, we were all surprised. Hinata was quite happy to explain that her father had told her that Naruto was allowed to come.

It would be Naruto's first time visiting the compound officially, as he had already visited once before during the summer festival when we had all snuck him in. Naruto had been extremely excited. I was just happy that Naruto was allowed to even come over the Hyuuga compound, just for Hinata's birthday.

A lot has happened since I first befriended Naruto. From one friend to nine friends, to being accepted by the Akimichi clan, to the rest of the Four Noble Clans of Konohagakure…it has been one hell of a year for Naruto. Aside from Naruto, Hinata and Neji have also experience some sort of change. Neji was no longer distancing himself from everyone and his fatalism had disappeared. He and Hinata have also been growing closer.

Neji still has some issues, but he was slowly adjusting to the recent changes in his life. I could've sworn I've seen him smiled at least once. I still annoyed him every once in a while by smacking a
sticker on his forehead. He still didn't appreciate it, but he never said anything about it.

Itachi was someone I should be wary of, and yet...we were all very close to him. We have accepted him as the big brother of our circle of friends. He definitely acted like the type, helping us out if we had any trouble. I had a feeling he and Neji had a sort of rivalry going on between them, but Itachi was rather passive about it.

Considering all the changes that have happened, I wonder if there is anything I should be worried about. There is still the Uchiha Clan Massacre, an event that has yet to occur. I should be afraid because two years isn't a lot of time...yet, I'm honestly calm. Maybe it's the fact that the Four Noble Clans have forged a bond over the year. I have been wondering if that could have changed anything. It's difficult to tell right now, as this is a change that would only become evident over a gradual period of time.

Again, I'm not too worried. I guess, what happens, happens... I don't think I mind, with all the smiles I have seen coming from Naruto, Hinata, Sasuke, and the rest of my friends.

Really, I don't mind...

Chapter End Notes

4-10-16 Annd that's as much of editing as I'll do for now (chapters 5-12)! By the by, I have updated Chōko's sprites and added even more to the already existing list! You can find the links to them on my tumblr at KlonoaDreams!

OMG I FINALLY DID IT! A LONG chapter! I have been waiting for this so long, you have no idea... So yeah, a lot of things happened. Neji is no longer the stick in the mud he used to be, having finally reached a breaking point due to children's game. Let me tell you about Kagome Kagome...if you look into some of the theories regarding it's origin and meaning, it's pretty damn disturbing. If you wish to know about it, I suggest you look up on Wikipedia. I have also made a reference to the Vocaloid song, Circle You, Circle You, which is effing creepy and has forever ruined the game Kagome Kagome for me...and if that wasn't enough, then it was the theories involving the game's meaning. Just ugh...but yeah, one thing I remember about Neji is that he compared himself to the caged bird and just...it stuck on.

When you have a bird lover, like me, hear anything bird-related, it sticks. Just to clear everything up, when I decided to implement Kagome Kagome as a game for the group, I had nearly forgotten about the "caged bird" thing going on with Neji... That was until I checked the lyrics again for Kagome Kagome. I realized that this song was going to affect Neji in some way and this is what had happened. Yeah...I feel bad, because the song contained a set of lyrics that triggered Neji. The poor kid...

Though, it did allow for Neji to have some development of sorts. Hinata opened up and revealed that she had blamed herself for the incident that ended with Hizashi's death and started Neji's fatalism and disdain for the Main House. As Shikamaru had suggested they talk to Hiashi about Neji's issues, they had gone through with it and...the result was Neji having been told the truth at a much earlier age than usual. Neji still has some issues, but they're mostly about how to act now that he's known the truth. He now has to deal with Chōko smacking a gold star sticker on his forehead.
Itachi has become the designated Big Bro of the group, as he is close to not only Sasuke, but also the rest of his friends. He and Neji are now officially part of the circle of friends, as is Kiba, who is honestly an interesting addition. I'm honestly surprised I haven't snuck in a Princess Mononoke reference… Of course, it might end up coming up soon, knowing my love for Studio Ghibli movies.

And if you're wondering about Chōko sounding boyish…it involves Japanese pronouns. Chōko refers to herself as "boku", which is what Chōji refers to himself as. "Boku" is a masculine pronoun that can be used by both males and females… If a female uses it, it's usually to sound tomboyish. In this case, Chōko uses it because she picked it up from Chōji. And because of that, Suzume, the kunoichi teacher, keeps telling Chōko to sound more feminine for the sake of the lesson to sound like a polite girl. In that case, Chōko uses "watashi", a standard, polite word for "I", usable by both men and women in formal situations. In the case of children, watashi is often used by girls, but never by boys, who use boku. I hope that clears up everything.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter because a lot really did happen. I'm honestly surprise I've made it this far in such a short time. I'm hoping to continue making progress. If I've made any mistakes, please don't hesitate to tell me! So until next time, everyone!
Shisui

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The New Year got off to a great start. Chōji and I spent it at the Akimichi compound, while everyone else did the same at their respective homes, with the exception of Naruto, who was invited over to the Uchiha compound. Overall, a very good start, I would say.

Winter vacation had been brief and immediately after, we were back at the Academy. Classes were still boring as ever, and kunoichi classes…don’t even get me started on them. Everyone passed the cultural exam, however…right after that, Suzume-sensei introduced us to dancing.

Traditional dancing, to be exact, which means a kimono is needed for the occasion…and a fan. And this wasn't just going to last a month, no…Suzume-sensei says we need much more time for that. How much time? Try until the end of the school year, so that means I have to deal with this shit until the end of March. Even worse, since Himawari is currently out of commission due to being pregnant with Hanabi, Mikoto volunteered to help Hinata and me with dance lessons. At the time, I didn’t think much about the offer because I knew I was going to need help.

Oh god, do I need it!

Then it came to my attention that the boys were watching Hinata and me as we practiced with Mikoto. No big deal, I thought at first. I mean, I should get used to people watching me because I might actually need to do this eventually as a kunoichi (undercover missions and whatnot). Except I underestimated who my exact audience was…and when I tripped on one of my kimono’s long sleeves and landed face-first onto the floor, I should have expected to hear Naruto, Sasuke, Chōji, Shikamaru, and Kiba laughing.

Just wait until I get out of this freaking kimono, you guys!

Itachi and Neji were at least kind enough to stay silent, as was Shino. And Hinata had been quick to help me off the floor, frantically asking me if I was hurt. I have no idea where my glasses are, as they flew off when I tripped. My nose isn’t bleeding, so I should consider myself lucky. And my kimono is still in one piece, so I guess I’m fine.

I wasn't hurt, but it certainly felt as if I was, in regards to my pride. Ah, humiliation, how long has it been since we last met? Oh, what's this? Are you messing with my emotions? I believe I do feel my eyes beginning to burn and my face beginning to heat up. Well, so much for trying to act cool…pfft, as if I could ever act cool.

Only in my dreams…

Uugh, and I was doing so well… I tried to hide my misty eyes from Mikoto, but I knew better than to hide anything from her. Mikoto saw that I was upset and patted me on the head before turning to her attention to Naruto, Sasuke, Chōji, Shikamaru, and Kiba. She scolded them for making me cry, telling them that they should apologize to me. And they did…

It was as awkward as it sounded…but I still appreciated it. Afterwards, Mikoto decided that Hinata and I needed a break, so she left the room after excusing herself. With their mother having left, Itachi poked Sasuke in the forehead. Sasuke whined as he rubbed his forehead, not appreciating the act. Naruto was about ready to laugh at Sasuke when Itachi decided to poke the blond in the forehead as
well. It was safe to say that Naruto wasn't laughing after that…but I was.

*That's what you get, ahahaha!*

I was definitely feeling better after that…though I can't say the same for my vision, what with my lacking glasses and—hello, who is touching my hand?

"H-Here, Chōko-san…" Oh, hey, Neji—are those my glasses I feel? Oh my god, they are! "I found them on the floor…"

"Thank you!" I exclaimed as I put my glasses on. "You sure saved me a lot of time and trouble!"

You have no idea how much of a bitch it is to search for your own glasses—especially if you're farsighted, like me… It's like searching in the dark for something, except instead of not being able to see, it's just a damn blur and I could very well be missing something that's right freaking there if it's within a certain range that's close enough to me.

"It's nothing…" Now, now, Neji, don't be so modest! "Ack!"

I smacked another gold star sticker onto Neji's forehead. Neji scowled at me as I pulled out the packet of stickers I had in my tamoto. Just because I'm wearing a kimono doesn't I'm gonna slack off on my sticker-giving duty! That wouldn't be right! And because Kiba laughed at me, he won't be getting any stickers today.

Anyways, tripping on my kimono sleeves—yeah, that's something I have to deal with. It's certainly annoying. There was also trying to avoid embarrassing myself in front of my friends (seriously, I do enough of that as is)…oh, and then there's *this* asshole in the form Uchiha Shisui!

At age thirteen, with short, unkempt dark hair and distinct onyx-black eyes embellished with well-defined lashes, Shisui was honestly not that bad looking (my vision may be shitty, but I'm not blind) … He was also freaking *tall* for a thirteen-year-old and too mischievous for his own good, for someone who was part of the Uchiha clan!

"Give me back my glasses!" And if you look to your left, you can see a tiny little girl (me) in a kimono, jumping up and down, to try and reclaim her glasses from a tall-ass teenager (Shisui).

"You need to try better than that, Chō-chan!" Shisui laughed as he lowered his hand that contained my glasses just enough so that it was within my reach, only to raise it as high as he could as soon as I jumped up to get them. "Ooh—so close!"

"This isn't funny, Shisui!" God dammit, why do you have to be so fucking tall?! Damn thirteen-year-olds, and your growth spurts!

*I call shenanigans on puberty!*

Since Hinata and I had started practicing with Mikoto, Shisui decided to start dropping by to say hello…except he overstayed his welcome this time. I barely know anything about Shisui and I have only really seen him a couple of times. He usually walked away whenever he saw Itachi was with us. Itachi had never told us why and when I had finally decided to ask, Shisui decided to answer my question…but not before stealing my glasses and instigating an unwanted game of keep-away with me.

"Itachi usually keeps to himself, so when I saw him around all of you—I saw an opportunity." Shisui grinned widely as he continued to watch me struggle in my attempts to regain my glasses from him.

"And boy, was it a big one! He's made so many friends—hey, hey, I hear you're leader of this group,
am I right?"

"I am not!" I still refuse! "And give me back my glasses! I need those for seeing things up close!"

_They are not meant for thirteen-year-olds to play keep-away!_

Right now, everyone close seems so freaking blurry—is that a spider on the wall over there?! Holy hell, it's huge! Oh god, I am not practicing with that spider in the room!

"You seemed to have calmed down so suddenly…" Shisui remarked, having ceased his grinning. "Something wrong, little lady?"

I blinked and shook my head. I hate it when I get distracted like that…but seriously, that spider is really bothering me. "U-Um…there's a spider on the wall…"

"Oh, is there?" Shisui looked in the direction I was pointing and nodded his head. "Okay—I'll take care of it…here you go, by the way!"

And just like that, Shisui put my glasses back on my face when I least expected it. What...the hell.

_You son of—you better watch your back, Shisui!_

So while Shisui walked off to go handle the current spider problem in the room, I took the moment to adjust my glasses and look at Itachi, who was currently wearing a rather blank expression on his face.

"He's not going to leave us alone, is he?" I found myself asking Itachi.

Itachi sighed. "No..."

"Is Shisui going to be joining us?" Sasuke looked questioningly at Itachi. "Is he?"

Itachi looked away from Sasuke, as if he didn't know what to say.

"Aww, are you trying to get rid of me?" Shisui, don't you ever fucking sneak up on me like that again. "Did I scare you—oh my god, I did!"

"Shut up!" I snapped, my body slowly relaxing from the tense state that Shisui put it through. "Wait...what did you do with the spider?"

Shisui tilted his head to the side. "Spider...oh, you mean this!"

There are a lot of things I never want to see being held in front of my face... This spider, for instance, is one of them. I have no idea how Shisui can even hold that fucking abomination without flinching whatsoever and—oh god, it moved!

"Aaah-aahhhhh-aaaaaahhhh!" Get it away, get it away, get it away—don't let it touch me! "Kill it! Kill it with fire!"

I don't freaking care how helpful spiders are! I want that thing out of my face—Shisui, don't you fucking touch me with that thing!

"Katon Goukakyuu no Jutsu!" An extremely weak flame suddenly set the spider in Shisui's hand on fire, to which Shisui immediately dropped spider onto the floor and started stomping on it to put out the flame. "Did it work?"
All attention was now on Sasuke, who was the one who had use the Goukakyuu (an extremely weaker version of it) on the spider in Shisui's hand. Itachi stared wide-eyed at his little brother and Shisui had a similar expression. Meanwhile with the rest of us, that being Chōji, Shikamaru, Naruto, Kiba, Neji, Shino, Hinata, and I, we were just staring. I was honestly relieved the spider was dead, but I was also surprised with what Sasuke had just done.

_Holy shit—Sasuke's a Charmander!_

_That's fucking awesome!_

"H-How did you do that, dattebayo?!" Naruto was the first out of any of us to speak, his eyes wide in awe.

Sasuke blinked owlishly. "I've been practicing with Nii-san…why?"

"G-Good job, Sasuke." Itachi was definitely impressed.

"M-Mikoto-saaaan!" Shisui suddenly shouted before running out of the room. "You'll never guess what Sasuke just did!"

And that was the tale of how Sasuke accomplished his clan's rite of passage. Of course, he still needed to work on his Goukakyuu, but the fact he was able to have gone from a puff of smoke to a weak flame was _extremely_ noteworthy.

After that day, Shisui _refused_ to leave us alone. He certainly made dance practice with Mikoto embarrassing, loudly applauding Hinata and I whenever we did something right. I still don't know much about Shisui (in regards to my shoddy knowledge on the _Naruto_ series), but from what I'm learning about him through the way he acted around us, all I can say…is that he is a dork. The dorkiest dork to ever dork…that is what Shisui is.

I'd certainly find Shisui's antics endearing to some degree…if I wasn't amongst those he adored to tease. Those whom Shisui loved to tease included, but was not limited to, Itachi (to a certain extent), Sasuke, Kiba, Shikamaru, Shino, Neji, and me…

Naruto got along _greatly_ with Shisui, like you wouldn't believe! Seriously, they got along like brothers (the non-bickering type). As for Hinata—Shisui had a soft spot for her, usually ruffling her hair at most before leaving her alone…_the lucky girl_. Shisui had tried teasing Chōji, but after he had shared some of his potato chips with the Uchiha, Shisui had decided that Chōji was too cool for him to tease.

_Chōji, you really suck, you know that?_

Itachi was at least relieved that he wasn't the only one suffering at the hands of Uchiha Shisui. He was certainly trying to hide a smirk when Shisui made a huge deal out of the gold star sticker I had smacked onto Neji's forehead.

Shisui and traditional dance lessons aside, the month went on as usual. Shino's sixth birthday marked the first time any of us have _ever_ visited the Aburame compound. It was very…_green_. There was an abundance of greenery, with many types of flowers adding splashes of color throughout the compound. It was a nice environment (a lot like a greenhouse), overall…and perfect for insects to thrive, according to Shino. Naruto certainly seemed intrigued with his surroundings.

As it had happened with the rest of us, Shino's birthday was also turned into a gathering for the Four Noble Clans. _Unlike_ the other times, Shisui joined us while the adults were in the other room. He rambled on and on about how _boring_ it had been to even stay with them.
"They go on and on about things, like, how is so and so doing," Shisui continued. "I hear your names mentioned in the conversations, like a certain glasses-wearing door-breaker—"

"Oh go to hell!' I'll have you know I haven't broken a door within a month! "And my name is Chōko!'"

Get it memorized, because I refuse to become the next Potato Girl!

"Chō-chan!" Shisui corrected with a wide grin on his face. "And she's Hina-chan."

Hinata blushed upon realizing that Shisui was referring to her. "Aah…"

"Anyone else you'd like to give a nickname?" I looked questioningly at Shisui.

Shisui thought for a moment…and then shook his head. "No, just you two girls…"

Two girls…wait a second…

I took a good look around the room and came to a realization…Hinata and I are the only girls in our circle of friends. How the fuck did I not realize that until now?!

Wow, I am so slow…

"So as I was saying…" Shisui kept going on about boring clan meetings. I was this close to tuning him out, but then he ended up talking about a certain incident—that incident being the day Chōji and I turned five, when we all cried because of Naruto. Apparently, it was thanks to us that the Uchiha and Hyuuga changed their minds about Naruto. Interesting…it seems the power of crying children is not to be underestimated. That sure did explain a lot and while I might have had my regrets then, I'm actually glad I brought Naruto over…if only because of the outcome.

He's not alone anymore…

After Shino's birthday, Naruto had taken an interest in gardening…most likely as a result from seeing all the greenery in the Aburame compound. Wasn't one of Naruto's hobbies watering plants…? Eh…well, it seems that things are evening themselves out in some ways.

It certainly seems that way, as Naruto hasn't been pulling any pranks due to all the attention he has been receiving from us, his friends, and from the Uchiha clan (especially the Uchiha clan). After all, Naruto's pranking was a result of him wanting attention of any sort. So without an incentive for attention (since he gets enough as is), Naruto shouldn't have taken up an interest in pranking, right?

That might have been the case…if it wasn't for Shisui.

Freaking Shisui!

So thanks to Shisui's surprisingly strong influence, Naruto took up an interest in pranking. Shisui was a bit of a joker to begin with and the fact that he and Naruto got along so well—honestly, it was probably a matter of when Naruto was going to pull his first prank. His first prank, by the way, happened when Iruka-sensei entered the classroom one day and had an eraser fall on top of his head. Out of everyone in the classroom, Naruto was the one laughing the hardest.

And so it begins.

…

The final months of the school year consisted of chakra training. This was the big event for many
students—on whether or not they were going to progress to the next school year or transfer to a
civilian school. Thinking about it now, the entire school year had been a process of weeding out
students who weren't cut out for the shinobi life (we had a lot of dropouts within the first month),
with chakra training being the moment of truth (for those still here).

Chōji and I missed out school every few days or so, due to the fact that, aside from molding chakra,
Chōza was also teaching us how to convert calories into chakra. Now if there's one thing I know
about calories, it's that the calorie can refer to a unit of heat. In physics, heat is energy in transfer,
other than by work or transfer of matter. As chakra is energy as well, converting calories into chakra
basically means manipulating one energy into another. Learning how to do that is essentially the
goal.

Accomplishing it, however—is a different story and pretty damn difficult one, at that! I just can't
seem to get the hang of it (probably doesn't help that my brain just keeps trying to SCIENCE instead
of concentrate). Father says a sign that we are successfully converting calories into chakra is a rise in
temperature (makes sense). I certainly don't feel any hotter…Chōji is at least showing progress.

God dammit, Chōji, we're never going to be in this together!

Later into the first month that Chōji and I began training, I started to improve (slowly, but surely).
Come the next month, Chōji and I have started successfully converting calories into chakra. By then,
we were already molding chakra. Molding chakra was much easier (just as easy as it is to tap into
your chakra—at least, for me, it is), if a bit physically draining. I usually got distracted by the pretty
color of my chakra as I was molding it and it really didn't help that the warm and soft sensation that
came from using my chakra was oddly addicting.

I'm honestly a danger to myself…

Chōji and I weren't the only ones who missed out on school, as Naruto had also been missing some
days, due to a request from the Sandaime, or "Jiji", as Naruto called him. I'm guessing Sarutobi was
Teaching Naruto how to mold chakra, as Naruto is…unique, for a lack of better terms.

…

During the final week of classes, we were tested on our ability to mold chakra, which a small number
of our classmates were unable to do. Everyone else was able to mold chakra, so we were going to be
advancing onto the next year, which was when the actual shinobi training began (training that would
include ninjutsu, genjutsu, and taijutsu).

So if you thought the first year was difficult, then think again!

Kunoichi classes tested us on our dancing abilities. A good chunk of the class failed the test, while
Hinata and I passed with flying colors, as did Ino and Sakura. Ami, Fuki, and Kasumi also passed,
with Fuki getting honorable mention (good on her!). As we had passed the test, we were told that
during the second year, we would be putting more focus into honing what we had learned during our
first year. The students who didn't pass were told they would be taking remedial lessons upon
returning for the second year (that's assuming they would be progressing to next year). They were
not allowed to advance until they had passed the retest.

Once the week had ended, we were let out of the Academy for spring vacation. It was around that
time that Hinata had become the proud older sister to Hyuuga Hanabi.

Sosmallstotinyhowcansomeonebeotiny…
Unfortunately, Hanabi's birth came at a price—Himawari had died shortly after giving birth. It wasn't a good time for anyone—Hinata especially. She had been so happy to become an older sister, but to learn that her mother died—I'll never forget that look on her face when she got the news.

With eyes that suddenly look so lifeless, with an expression that was devoid of any emotion—it was a face that was going to be haunting my nightmares.

*What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?*!

*I don't know what to do!*

*Empty empty empty empty…*

*Why am I not crying?*

*Cold cold cold…*

Talking to Hinata did absolutely nothing, since she was so unresponsive… But that wasn't the worst of it—oh no…the worst part was that she just stopped talking. Gone was the soft, gentle voice with a laugh that was just so adorable. All there was to Hinata was silence.

*Such frightening silence…*

*Hinata, please say something!*

*Something something something…*

Hinata didn't even cry…she just sat down and stared at her lap for nearly three hours straight, just minutes after being told Himawari had died. It was only until Neji brought Hinata over to see her baby sister that she finally started to cry. But all that came out of Hinata were tears—no sound. Just silence…such frightening silence. And it really wasn't until then, that the fact that Himawari was dead finally sank in.

It sank in so quickly, that I had no idea how to even process the sudden rush of emotions and thoughts that plagued my mind.

*She's dead.*

*Pain pain pain…*

*She's dead she's dead she's dead.*

*I hurts i hurts i hurts i hurts!* 

*She's not coming back because she's dead.*

*Why why why why why?*

*She's dead like you once were!* 

*I hurts i hurts—ITHURTSSOMUCH!* 

She's—

I...really don't remember much of that day... Everything after that was all a blur. All I really remember was the throbbing pain in my head as I watched Hinata cry silently while Neji comforted
her. And then I woke up in a room, with my friends surrounding my bed.

_What...happened?_

I was told that it was stress that had made me black out—stress that had come from losing Himawari (she's gone she's gone she's gone) and seeing Hinata reacting so badly (silence such frightening silence). It earned me a night's stay at the hospital, because of the way I had suddenly collapsed.

Everyone had been so worried—but Hinata had probably worried the most, with the way she had hugged me and refused to let go. She still wasn't talking...but I have a feeling that the idea that she could have lost me, as she had her mother, must have crossed her mind.

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean to make you worry..." She must have been so scared... "I'm sorry—I just...I'm sorry..."

I'm repeating myself, but that's all I can really say. What else am I supposed to say?

_I don't know...

I don't know I don't know I don't know.

I just don't know..._

Had it not been for Shisui and Itachi, I doubt we would have ever been able to move on before classes resumed at the Academy. To them, death wasn't anything new. Sure, it hurt to see how empty the Hyuuga compound felt without Himawari's presence. But it's just something we have to live with, from here on out.

_We're still coping..._

At the very least, Hanabi was a very healthy baby, for someone who was so tiny (sotiny sosmall). She was also the cutest baby I had ever seen...like, really (tiny handstiny hands). And unlike Hinata, Hanabi took after her father, Hiashi, from the way she had inherited his black hair. She was so full of life, for someone who was only a few days old...

_I'm glad I'm glad I'm glad..._

It still hurts...knowing that Hanabi will never have a chance to know Himawari, as the rest of us had. It hurts...and I don't think it'll ever stop hurting—not now, at least.

...  

...  

Upon returning to the Academy for our second year, we started learning about ninjutsu and genjutsu—the basics of the basics. Come gym class, taijutsu lessons began and, soon after that, sparring.

Back in my previous life, I actually took up martial arts, or more specifically, Tae Kwon Do. I was a blue belt...I was supposed to have been a brown belt, but then I accidentally sprained my toe when it got caught on the foam mat as I was practicing my forms. University life soon took over and the cost of classes became an issue...so I stopped attending.

If there was one thing that impressed the instructor, it was how fast I had progressed from white belt all the way to blue belt within the span of two years. I was really determined to make it to black
belt…guess that'll never happen now.

_C'mon, Chōko—stay positive…_

_Please…_

Instead of moping about the past, I decided to focus more on the present (even though the present was just as painful, now that Himawari was gone and Hinata still wasn't talking). I took taijutsu seriously, as I had done Tae Kwon Do (it was just so easy to do—to focus completely on something while ignoring everything else). The only difference between now and the past, was that I don't have to deal with immature children who think it's funny to disrupt class—oh wait. I forgot who my friends are. Never mind…

_Not that I even mind…_

I used to worry a lot about my physical strength. I didn't want to hurt anybody…but after my current sparring partner decided that it would be funny to break my glasses, I couldn't care less at the moment and ended up breaking the poor kid's nose…What horrified me the most, then, was how easy it was for me to throw that punch and ignore the sickening crunch that came afterwards.

Had I done this in my previous life, I would have gotten into some serious shit. Luckily, for me, that was not the case, because in this life, this type of crap was _expected_ to happen. It's really disturbing when you sit down to think about it, but then again—we're being trained to become killers.

Breaking people's noses is the least of my concerns, when I could be doing so much worse while a medic-nin healed such minor injuries.

_So much worse…_

After that particular sparring incident, everyone kept their distance from me. I…wouldn't exactly blame them. Meanwhile with Naruto and Sasuke, they were too busy trying to one-up each other (it seems they're coping through their rivalry). Kiba was eventually assigned as my sparring partner after he had left a particularly nasty bite on his last partner. I made him swear not to bite me, because otherwise, I was going to kick him where the sun didn't shine.

"As if I could ever bite you, anyways…" Kiba laughed. "You don't deserve it!"

"Then why did he deserve it?" I was quick to ask.

"Because he was picking on Hinata for being quiet…" Kiba practically snarled when he answered my question.

"Ah…I see…" So that's why…that's good to know.

"Hey—do I get a sticker for that?" Kiba looked expectantly at me. "Or is that too much?"

I honestly have no clue, but…_he did_ stand up for Hinata…

…

…

_Smack!_
The times I wasn't with Kiba, I was with Hinata ([silentsosilent]). Everyone had expected me to kick her ass, but on the contrary, Hinata kicked my ass (I wasn't the only one focusing so intensely on taijutsu). Never underestimate the Hyuuga heiress, as soft-spoken as she is (even though she hasn't spoken at all since the day Himawari died). She should really take advantage of that, because she could seriously benefit from the deadly art of deception. I'll probably tell her, one of these days…

*Maybe on a day when she's speaking again…*

As for kunoichi classes…we were learning how to conceal weapons in a kimono. You'd be amazed at how many places you can hide a weapon while wearing a kimono. It was pretty awesome…but what wasn't awesome, was the fact that we had to implement that into traditional dancing.

*As if things aren't hard enough already…*

Mikoto was still a great help. And Shisui…he was an absolute dork—the dorkiest of dorks to have ever existed and I have never been so glad. Because it was easy to smile when he was around—*so very, very easy*, that I didn't mind when he refused to let me hear the end of it whenever I screwed up during weapon concealment dancing.

*Why mind when I'm laughing again?*

Chōji and I soon turned six come the next month. By now, the gathering of the Four Noble Clans had become an official occurrence. Shisui's presence in the room while the adults were talking in the other room was another thing that probably wasn't going to change. Despite all the teasing he usually did, Shisui was a pretty funny guy. It was certainly amusing for all of us to watch him annoy Itachi.

It sure took our mind off of things—just knowing that there was one less person in the room next to ours. It was during this time that Sasuke decided to bring up what I first told Itachi a year ago when I first saw him. Shisui had been curious to know what had happened when he wasn't around, and after finding out I had told Itachi that he looked like a weasel, Shisui started teasing Itachi for it.

Shisui never saw it coming until he was literally flying across the room after receiving a swift punch to the face by Itachi. Itachi had his limits and of all things, it seems that "weasel" was where he drew the line.

Holy shit.

No one said anything…it was just so sudden. It was only until Shisui sat up, rubbing his cheek as he complained about how hard Itachi had punched him, that we all started laughing. Because it was so *unlike* of Itachi to do something like that—but he still did it, anyways.

"Hey, you're all laughing!" Shisui was elated, his grin growing even wider when he realized that even *Hinata* was laughing. "Hina-chan—your voice!"

*That laugh that cute that laugh!*

*It's back it's back it's back!*

*Sohappy so happy so happy!*
I started laughing even harder as I wrapped my arms around Hinata. I just couldn't stop laughing. I just was so happy—so relieved—to hear her voice again. I kept laughing until I started crying.

"I-I'm sorry…I d-didn't mean to make you w-worry…" Hinata echoed, a small smile crossing her lips as she patted me on the back. "I-It's okay…"

Somehow, despite all that had happened, I find myself believing Hinata. Even though things were anything but okay…it didn't matter right now. We're still coping—but for now…this is enough.

*It's okay…*

Chapter End Notes

4-18-16 More editing on the way and I'm gonna say this now, I did not like how this chapter originally was, with the way Himawari just up and died without much impact being shown. Now, you can see the impact it had on Hinata (instead of me just glossing it over) and, through that extension, the impact it also had on Chōko (that's new, actually). Of course, as a result, this chapter is no longer as lighthearted as it originally was. Things happen.

Yeah…Himawari died. I honestly wasn't expecting to grow so attached to her, but I did. Everyone is still coping, but they're getting better. It'll take time, though. Moving on from that, let's talk about that Academy.

I consider the first year where they spend more time weeding out students who aren't cut out for the shinobi life, the last months being focused on chakra training. Chakra training is basically the moment of truth, whether or not anyone will advance to the next year or transfer to a civilian school. There are exceptions, considering Rock Lee…but he's a special case who got a recommendation. If you're lucky enough someone has seen you working hard enough throughout the year, you could get a recommendation, which could help if you're like Rock Lee.

That aside, the second year is where the real training begins. And in case anyone is wondering, I am in fact a blue belt in Tae Kwon Do…I am supposed to be a brown belt, but I ended up spraining my left foot's little toe when it got caught in the foam mat while I was practicing my blue belt form for the upcoming belt promotion test. After a month's absence, I returned…then college started getting a bit hectic for me and I had to stop going to Tae Kwon Do altogether. It's been nearly a year since I've gone. I want to go back, but I'm so out of shape, I'll die during the warm-up. If I can't get past the warm-up, then I won't make it through the entire lesson.

I still plan on returning…right after I get back into shape. That's enough of my life story, let's move onto Shisui…he is a dork. That is how he came out to be in this fic. He is also the reason Naruto took an interest in pranking, as Naruto would have no actual incentive, as he has been receiving attention.

Despite there being deviations, things eventually even out in some way or form, as shown with how Naruto took an interest in pranking. He has also taken an interesting in gardening, thanks to the Aburame compound, which I always pictured as being a greenhouse of sorts.
Also, Shisui has revealed that the incident that happened during Chōji and Chōko’s fifth birthday, in which there were a lot of crying children, did in fact influence the Four Noble Clans, or more specifically, the Uchiha and Hyuuga clans. That is the reason why they had started opening up to Naruto.

ALSO, thanks to this chapter and me talking to ChibiFoxAI, I have managed to implement SCIENCE into Naruto. It is as weird as it sounds, but what makes it baffling is that it makes sense. I managed to apply the second law of thermodynamics to Chōji.

The second law of thermodynamics limits the amount of work that can be performed by energy that is obtained via a heating process—some energy is always lost as waste heat.

Apply it to Chōji and it explains how he never really loses or gains weight, despite being able to convert calories into chakra. And if you think that's weird, then wait until you see what I ended up doing to the Natures. I try to forget about science…but I always end up coming back to it in SOME way. THERE IS NO ESCAPE.

Now this chapter might not be as long as the last chapter, but it still is longer than the others, so I'm happy. That's about it for now, so I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! By the way, this is chapter 13, so there's another one! Ahahaha, yeah…well, until next time, everyone!
"I feel like a weight's been lifted from my shoulders now that Hina-chan is talking again!" Shisui hasn't stopped grinning since he first noticed Hinata was laughing. I don't think any of us have stopped smiling—Hinata was talking again and we were just so very, very happy…and relieved.

Relieved relieved relieved.

I haven't stopped hugging Hinata. I just…need a moment…

"Hey, hey, Itachi—are you ready?" Shisui suddenly asked Itachi.

"Are you?" Itachi directed his eyes on Shisui. "You weren't exactly subtle last night when you were packing your belongings in a hurry."

"Ooh, what were you doing up so late?" Shisui grinned at Itachi. "Huh? Huh?"

Itachi sighed. "I was trying to sleep."

"Nii-san!" Sasuke called out, curiosity having got the best of him. "What's going on?"

"Well…" Shisui began, his grin only growing even wider.

Do I even want to know?

…

We found out that Itachi and Shisui were leaving Konohagakure tomorrow morning to participate in the Chuunin exams being held in Amegakure. How long they were going to be gone, Shisui didn't know, but I might have had a rough estimate… If my shitty memory recalls correctly, Itachi was supposed to have made Chuunin at age ten (he's turning eleven next month). Assuming that a deviation hasn't occurred, Itachi should still be able to make Chuunin shortly before his eleventh birthday, so he and Shisui should be back in a month…hopefully.

This is also assuming that the exams in Ame go through a different procedure than Konoha's Chuunin Exams, but I really wouldn't know since I'm just speculating.

By the way, it turns out that Shisui and Itachi are on the same team. Who would've thought? I certainly wouldn't have, because I don't know shit. There are a lot of things I didn't know until now—like the fact that Itachi used to be part of different Genin team. How that happened—Itachi would rather not say.

"He doesn't like to talk about Team 2—it's best not to pry." Shisui left it at that as he followed after Itachi, who had left the room.

Some moments had passed before Sasuke suddenly said, "Nii-san awakened his Sharingan when he was eight…"

"Did he?" What the hell happened?

Sasuke frowned. "I don't know the details—but I do know that that was the day Team 2 was
"H-Hey—let's play ninja!" Naruto was quick to exclaim—most likely in an attempt to change the subject.

"You know what—why not?" I'm up for it.

"You're gonna have to let go of Hinata, though," Kiba brought up.

I stared at Kiba for a few moments, my arms still wrapped around Hinata in an embrace. I thought about it for a moment, before gently tightening my embrace.

"No," I simply said before sticking out my tongue.

Kiba sputtered, completely caught off-guard by my response. Hinata started to laugh (*thatcutelaughthatcutelaugh*), which caused everyone else to do the same.

*Best. Birthday. Ever!*
using actual weapons.

Joy...

Everyone passed the weapon concealment test, with the students who had been stuck taking remedial lessons having also passed their retest. They were now behind us, as we moved onto cosmetics.

Make-up is just so interesting to me, despite the fact that I rarely ever used any in my past life. The different shades, colors, and effects it had on the face—everything about it was just so interesting. And then there are certain shades of lipsticks—I don't care if I don't wear it. If it looks pretty, I want it.

Just like certain shades of nail polish...

I was actually enjoying myself for once. Although, I could have enjoyed myself even more if it wasn't for one thing…my make-up game is hella weak. Like so weak, I don't even have any game. Anyone who can apply make-up immediately earns my respect because I can't do shit.

The most I can do now, after so much practice, is hide the markings on my cheeks. And that alone is something I consider a huge accomplishment. Everything after that is a hit or miss, because wearing glasses makes it harder to apply make-up when you actually need them on your face to see.

Curse you, hyperopia!

Suzume-sensei can sympathize, because she, too, also wears glasses. And while she means well, it was the last thing I needed because my classmates are picking on me again. I've been accused of making it as far as I have because of favoritism. As far as favoritism goes, when it comes to Suzume-sensei—pfft, okay, no. Sorry, but Mochizuki Suzume is the last person to ever have favorites, as she treats all of her students equally.

With the exception of Fuki and maybe a few other students, but that's only because Suzume-sensei accommodates her lessons so that everyone can follow along without any difficulties setting them back.

That's equal opportunity for you!

Though, thinking of it now, all that attention from Suzume-sensei doesn't just happen without a reason. She always seems to notice whenever I lose track of the lecture, because my listening skills aren't the best (neither is my memory). She is aware that I don't ask questions (because I have this irrational fear of being seen as stupid for asking a question that may very well have an obvious answer to everyone else, but me). It's why she just strikes up a conversation with me whenever she drops by to check up on me.

To anyone else, it would come off as rude to just give unwanted advice—except that advice is anything but unwanted to me. I need that advice. Because I otherwise wouldn't ask for it and Hinata could only help me for so long (she has her limits, too). Suzume-sensei knows exactly what she is doing as an instructor and I applaud her for that.

And it's because of that, that favoritism is the last thing I would ever expect from her. Suzume-sensei is not like that, and everyone else damn well knows it—but the accusations still pop up every now and then. Favoritism accusations aside, I still had fun with make-up, despite my crappy skills and nonexistent make-up game.

I managed to pass the make-up exam with a decent grade. I am quite content with this, though I feel I can do better (and I will try to do better).
A week after Itachi's birthday, Iruka-sensei, Shisui, and the aforementioned ten-year-old returned to Konohagakure in one piece—all three of them no longer Genin, but Chuunin. And as a Chuunin, that meant Iruka-sensei was officially an Academy instructor and through that extension, that also meant Mizuki's presence was no longer needed at all, whatsoever. You better believe that there was much rejoicing when the prick left from this circle of friends.

*See ya never, Mizuki!*

To start off his return, Iruka-sensei introduced us to real kunai and shuriken. He got us acquainted with them in a way books and lectures couldn't do. We're still not starting target practice until fall, however. So, for the most part, we're just learning how to physically handle kunai and shuriken (handle with care, because ouch!).

Of course, Shisui decided that waiting was for squares and thought we would benefit a whole lot from learning early. So visits to the Uchiha compound turned into target practice at the dojo.

"Now when you throw a shuriken or a kunai, you want to aim for the vital parts," Shisui explained in a rather casual manner that would have been disturbing, if I hadn't already become somewhat desensitized to the world I now live in (some things still catch me by surprise…). "Observe!"

It only took a split second after Shisui had thrown the shuriken for the weapon to embed itself perfectly into the bull's-eye of a face-less wooden target that was a distance away.

*Holy shit!*

"Now I want you guys to try—Itachi, I can see you trying to leave." Shisui placed his hands on his hips, his expression blank as he looked at Itachi, who stared back with an expression that was just as blank. "You still have a long ways to go before you can leave without me noticing…nice try, though. Now go be the best Nii-san ever and help out Sasuke with his position."

"Hn…" Itachi wasn't exactly happy he had gotten caught by Shisui, but he still did as he was told (much to Sasuke's utter delight).

As much of a dork as Shisui is, he is quite the educator—an extremely good one, at that (if he wasn't a shinobi, he would have certainly done well as a teacher). It's certainly never a boring time whenever Shisui is teaching (unlike freaking Mizuki). And I owe it all to this guy for telling me how to utilize the advantages my hyperopia possessed. How exactly is my hyperopia useful, you ask? Well, despite the fact that I can't see for shit up close (I can still make out figures and colors), I can still make use of what I can see clearly from a far distance.

So to make a long story short, I had better aim than Sasuke. For someone Sasuke's age, he was doing far better than anyone else did and gave Neji a run for his money. You can certainly bet that Sasuke was quite proud of himself, because when it came to having better aim, right after Sasuke was Shisui and Itachi, with Itachi receiving quite a notable mention because he's a freaking expert *(hot damn)*. Well…that had been the case.

Then Shisui removed my glasses and had me throw a few kunai at a random, faraway target. And when the kunai embedded themselves as close as possible to the target without exactly hitting the bull's-eye, it became clear how drastically my aim had improved. Because I can tell you right now, before Shisui had taken off my glasses, only *one* of those kunai had even gotten close to the target.

"Wow…" Shisui's eyes were wide in awe, a small grin tugging at the corner his lips. "Hey, Chō-
I stared at Shisui for a few seconds, as best as I could with my piss-poor vision. I blinked a couple of times before bluntly asking, "What the hell is shurikenjutsu?"

"What are they teaching you at the Academy?" Shisui seemed absolutely appalled. "Okay, gather around, children—Shisui-sensei's got something to say!"

About an explanation later, we got a crash course in shurikenjutsu. Shurikenjutsu refers to techniques that entail the throwing of shuriken, kunai, senbon, or any other number of bladed, hand-held weapons. Itachi is an expert in shurikenjutsu, which certainly explains the notable mention he has received for his aim…but I digress. And I've been digressing, but it's thanks to Shisui that I started considering shurikenjutsu.

I mean, if you think about it, with my hyperopia, I could basically make myself into a kunoichi-version of Meirin from *Kuroshitsuji*. And I don't know about you, but that sounds absolutely bitchin' to me!

*Hell yeah!*

Meanwhile in kunoichi classes, we have moved onto hairstyling and it's honestly not that difficult? Eh, in any case, the students who were a lesson behind us now had to deal with both make-up and hairstyling throughout the entire month in order to catch up with the rest of the class. It honestly doesn't seem that fair, at first glance—but make-up isn't that difficult to practice with and the same can be said about hairstyling. This is honestly the perfect opportunity for them to catch up.

Anyways, hairstyling—yeah, on one hand, it isn't that difficult of a task. But on the other hand, the most I can do with my own hair is tie it up in a ponytail. I've only recently figured out how to braid my own hair, and that's because it's gotten even longer than it was previously (long hair makes everything easier for me, despite the fact that maintenance is a pain in the ass). At this point in time, my hair goes down to my hips whenever it's out of its braid.

I'm still learning, though—so I'm sure I'll pick up on a few other hairstyles, if I pay enough attention… Okay, yeah, no, I might be a lost cause.

*Might have to actually ask Suzume-sensei for help…*

And the never-ending cycle of bullying continues, with *all* attention shifting away from me to poor Kasumi. Kasumi's naturally curly auburn hair has earned her quite some ridicule, for reasons I still couldn't figure out (her hair is *adorable* with the way it curls up and just—it's not fair, dammit). As with Fuki, Ami reacted the same way towards others picking on her friend.

Although, Ami might have gone a step further when she yanked out a *clump of hair* from a girl's scalp, as punishment for pulling on Kasumi's hair. This all happened within the first week the bullying had begun and it wasn't that much of a surprise that it ceased immediately after.

*Holy crap…*

Anyways, with everyone learning how to do their own hair (me included), I've noticed an increase in the number of girls who approach our circle of friends to talk to Sasuke. Each time they did it, their hair was always done up in a different hairstyle. Of course, Sasuke still had no tact and made a group of girls cry when he said their hair looked weird and ugly…because the girls were still learning.

*Damn, Sasuke…*
"Itachi-san isn't going to be happy when he finds out you've made those girls cry," Shikamaru remarked as he watched the group of girls run off, crying their eyes out.

"Maybe if their hair was just as pretty as Chōko's, then I wouldn't have made them cry!" Sasuke huffed as he tried to steal a tomato from me. "I was just telling the truth."

"That makes no sense—you think I have pretty hair?" Priorities, Chōko, priorities—oh, who am I kidding. I think it's nice someone complimented me on my hair.

Yeah!

"Hinata has pretty hair, too…but yours is longer," Sasuke took a bite out of the tomato he had just stolen from me…the punk! After chewing a few times, he swallowed and then added, "Long hair looks nice."

Yes, yes, it does look nice—wait what?

Oh, you gotta be fucking kidding me!

Don’t you dare tell me that this is how the rumor of Sasuke liking long hair gets out! No, I refuse to be the reason girls start growing out their hair because Sasuke likes long hair!

Fuck that shit—Sakura and Ino do not need this drama ruining their friendship!

Unfortunately, life seems to hate me as, a few days later, I started getting picked on for having such long hair (I currently have everyone beat for longest hair in Suzume-sensei's class). I was not happy…especially since these girls were mad that I was friends with Sasuke, even though Hinata was his friend as well, but she was overlooked for reasons that involved her short hair and no one really wanted to mess with a Hyuuga.

Seriously, is the concept of a boy and a girl being friends too difficult to comprehend?

It's not rocket science (which probably doesn't exist in this world). It's as simple as can be, just like asexuality (the lack of sexual attraction) and aromanticism (lack of romantic attraction)…

Then again…

Well, at least I'm more prepared to explain myself when it comes to my asexuality, now…

Moving on!

So yeah, long hair, getting picked on—throughout all of that, everyone seemed to have forgotten my door-breaking strength. It was only until someone tried breaking my glasses that said strength was brought into attention the hard way (I admit—I might have overreacted, but I just got so mad). Let's just say that a couple of my classmates (all girls, in this case) were taken to the Academy's infirmary after that.

Again, if I had done this in my past life, I would’ve gotten into some deep shit…but this is the world of Naruto and stuff like this is the norm… Well, the norm everywhere, except in civilian families.

I kinda figured…

The girls I sent to the infirmary all came from civilian families (that makes a lot of sense, now that I think about it) and their parents were pissed off that I had hurt their "precious angels".

Precious my ass!
Thankfully, Suzume-sensei came to my defense and put them in their place when she brought up that what I had done was in self-defense. And really, it was the girls' fault for messing with someone from the Akimichi clan (you just don't do that when you're supposed to learn how to pick your fights). Upon realizing that I was an Akimichi, the parents dropped the subject and left.

I felt oddly smug, for getting away with something because of my clan's name…

It's a little unsettling, the more I think about it, but I do appreciate the fact that Suzume-sensei was on my side. I'm still not happy that I was the reason that girls found out about Sasuke liking long hair.

_What the fuck, Sasuke?! Why you gotta throw me under a bus?_

Ooohhhh, _please_ don't tell me Sakura and Ino are going to fight over Sasuke and end up damaging their friendship because of it… _Please_, those two girls were getting along _so_ well—I mean, really!

_They've been inseparable from the very start…_

And yet, despite all of my concerns, I might have jumped far too quickly to conclusions. I managed to overhear a conversation between the two girls by accident. Sakura was helping Ino out with her long, blonde hair, when the Yamanaka mentioned that she was growing out her hair now, because of what she heard about Sasuke.

"I'm sure you're going to look so pretty!" Sakura smiled warmly as a light blush tinged her cheeks.

"What about you?" Ino wore a smile on her face as she asked her question. "I know you don't like Sasuke-kun, but I think you'd look just as pretty with long hair! It's such a pretty color, after all!"

Sakura just laughed. "That's very nice, but…I'm going to keep it short."

Ino frowned as she looked up at Sakura, who was in the middle of braiding her hair. "Why?"

"Because I like the way my short hair looks with the ribbon you gave me!" Sakura's smile was so genuine, as was her response.

Ino's face turned a brilliant shade of red as she sputtered for a few moments. She inhaled deeply, and then exhaled, before meekly responding with a quiet, "Thanks…"

I almost wanted to cry, because of how touching their friendship was to me. And also, because there was absolutely no sign for any disputes that could tear these two apart. Sakura had no interest in growing out her hair and Ino had already mentioned that Sakura didn't like Sasuke, meaning that the crush her canon counterpart had was nonexistent, here. Was this the reason for her being in a different class?

_Is it because of me?_

I'm concerned…but at the same time, relieved—because Sakura cares more about her friendship with Ino than some boy she doesn't even know. And I _know_ she doesn't know Sasuke the way she did in canon, had she been in the same class as him. Maybe that's probably why the crush never developed…

…

Everyone did well on the hairstyling exam, with Kasumi getting honorable mention for being able to use her curly hair as a charm point for her hairstyle. Ami was absolutely smug as she looked down at those who had once picked on Kasumi. Fuki even managed to verbally congratulate Kasumi, despite
the fact that Fuki would rather not speak at all.

I was just happy I could put up my hair in something other than a braid or a ponytail…or pigtails, braided or unbraided. The students who had been a lesson behind us had now officially caught up with the rest of the class. They were able to join us for the next lesson regarding tea ceremonies. I'm not going to enjoy this, because tea ceremonies mean wearing a kimono and because of how formal tea ceremonies are, that meant the seiza position was essential.

Fuck…my…life…

Visits to the Uchiha compound continued as Mikoto helped Hinata and I learn about tea ceremonies —both what it consisted of and how it was performed. Once she had started helping us practice, Itachi and Neji were dragged into it as our practice guests. The others hung out with Shisui, who continued being the best target practice teacher he could ever be.

That dorky bastard!

Shisui was supposed to have been helping, alongside Itachi, but he nominated Neji to take his place and Mikoto just went along with it. Let me just say…fuck you, Shisui. You have no idea how unnerving it was to have Neji as a practice guest.

Why am I so unnerved? While Neji isn't exactly that bad of a practice guest, he had a bad habit of watching my every movement. It just gave me a lot of uncomfortable pressure, even though I'm sure he doesn't mean it.

With Itachi, it's an entirely different story, although he does the exact same thing as Neji…

It's probably the eyes—yeah, it's the eyes.

That aside, everything was going well…then it happened.

Can't go through a consecutive amount of time without any bad happening, I fucking swear!

During a kunoichi class, Ami tripped as she was passing by Sakura's table and ended up knocking over the kettle full of hot water onto Sakura. It was a rather traumatizing day, considering how badly the water scalded Sakura's skin. It was not a pretty sight and her screams were just as bad.

They're gonna haunt my nightmares…

It was so distressing, seeing Sakura, of all people, getting hurt—and at such a young age! Although, out of everyone in Suzume-sensei's class, there was no one who was more distressed than Ami. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she hesitantly tried to reach out to Sakura. Her hands were shaking so badly while her body trembled. Her brown eyes were wide and filled with fear.

Ami was a blubbering mess by the time Suzume-sensei had dismissed class, in order to take Sakura to the hospital (it happened all too quickly). Seeing the usual headstrong girl who didn't take shit from anyone in such a state was just so…disconcerting. It's easy to forget that she's still a child sometimes…

We all are...

Just to clarify, it was all an accident—but the point still stands that Ami is the reason (albeit, accidentally) Sakura had to go to the hospital. And because of that accident, with many of our classmates holding grudges against Ami…it wasn't a surprise that they decided to start spreading rumors. Rumor has it that Ami had tripped on purpose because she had intended to hurt Sakura,
never mind the fact that Ami was really just unfortunate enough to trip on her own kimono and cause such an accident.

*Children can be so petty and cruel...*

Sakura was fine, by the way. She came back from the hospital a couple of days later, looking quite fine, even though the water had scalded her skin rather badly at the time of the accident. She went on and on, nonstop, about how the medic-nin at the hospital. She had such a wide grin on her face, her eyes lit up with joy as she talked about how nice they were to her and what they did to help her.

"They're the reason I don't have any scars!" Sakura laughed as she showed off her unblemished skin.

*It's amazing what medical ninjutsu can do in this world...*

Meanwhile with Ami, after getting bullied by others for a change, she started growing rather irritated and short-tempered. After about a week, Ami decided to vent out her frustration at me during lunch break. Why me, out of everyone else, I have no clue—I mostly ignored her.

Then she made me drop the onigiri I had in my hands and I just snapped.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" I yelled at Ami, my hands tightened into fists. "Why do you feel the need to take it out on me?!

_I didn't do shit to you!_

"Wh-Wha?" Ami hadn't been expecting me to react that way, based on the expression she had on her face. She almost seemed scared—no, she _was_ scared!

Why are you scared?

Ami was covering her face, as if she was waiting for me to hit her—even though I wasn't.

"I'm not going to hit you..." And not even seconds after I had said that, I noticed the dark bruise on Ami's left cheek. Without even thinking, I found myself asking, "Where did you get that?"

That's all it took—that's all it really took for Ami to start crying. Kasumi and Fuki were quick at trying their best to console their distressed friend. I stared at the scene before me, my heart beginning to pound within my chest. I was a little anxious, so I looked back at my friends, who all were just so confused.

What do I do?

I turned back to Ami and her friends, swallowing hard as I tried to figure out what to say. I ended up saying the first word that popped into my head. "Food?"

...

I found out that day, while Ami was on the verge of an anxiety attack, that this little girl (littlegirllittlegirllittlegirl) comes from a dysfunctional civilian family. A family that she goes to at the end of each day, knowing that part of the reason her parents keep arguing is because she exists.

"Because I'm an accident," the violet-haired girl explained with such a forced smile as tears streamed down her cheeks. "And accidents aren't wanted..."
She's only six years old, repeating a phrase she's heard so often. She shouldn't have to put up with this—*no one should*.

*But that's her life.*

That's the life Ami returns to at the end of each day. It's a life she hopes to escape by becoming a Genin. That's why she's here at the Academy—because it's her safe zone.

*It was her safe zone…*

Ami wasn't the only with issues, however. Fuki had her own share as well, regarding her hearing disability and her own parents. Fuki isn't exactly the first Academy student of her specific situation with her disability (nor is she the last), but to civilians…she'd be treated with some skepticism. And while Fuki isn't from a civilian family, both of her parents are and the upbringing that comes from such a background tends to show itself at what the worst of times. In Fuki's case, she is constantly pressured by her own parents to become a medic-nin, like them, so she can work with them at the hospital.

"It's…safe…" Fuki says as if she's repeating a phrase she has heard quite often. "You don't…have to worry. You can…read if you can't…listen."

But Fuki doesn't want that—she wants to choose. She wants to choose like her parents did when they decided to take up medical ninjutsu. And Fuki doesn't want their life—she wants her own life, even if her parents feel she can't accomplish it too well because of her disability.

And Kasumi…Kasumi doesn't have a family—she's an orphan. Just one of the many attending the Academy—it's not that uncommon of a sight. But it is somewhat uncommon to come across an orphan with a surname. Nanashi Kasumi just happens to stand out enough at the orphanage for the other orphans to pick on her.

With her curly hair and peculiar surname, Kasumi is known as "No-Name Kasumi" amongst the other orphans. To any orphan attending the Academy, becoming a Genin is their one-way ticket to crafting an identity they can call their own, after being known as just an orphan for so long.

"I want to exist…" Kasumi simply proclaims as she continues to comfort Ami, who is now hiccupping.

Ami, Fuki, and Kasumi…they might have been minor characters in the *Naruto* series, but here—they're actual people. They are children with problems (problems they shouldn't have—but do)…and I'm just someone who was probably never meant to exist.

*But I'm here…*

*I exist.*

It's rather sobering, just looking at these three children with such specific goals. They're barely six-years-old, and they're already thinking of the future.

*But you're not.*

I don't want to.

*But you should.*

My head hurts…
"P-Please…don't tell…" Fuki almost begs as she looks at us with such pleading eyes.

It hurts…

"No one else knows…" Kasumi frowns.

It hurts it hurts.

"They're not supposed to know…" Ami sniffs as she continues to wipe away her tears. "Not now—not when I'm still living with them…"

Hurtshurtshurtshurtshurtshurtsithurts.

"We won't tell…" I managed to say, my eyes somewhat moist with tears. "Ahh…we won't tell… please stop crying."

…

…

Ami, Fuki, and Kasumi didn't join our circle of friends after that incident. At best, Ami, Fuki, and Kasumi were acquaintances. But we still kept our word and didn't tell anyone of what we now knew. Initially, the three girls were all anxious that we all knew, because of the slight chance we might tell someone. But as the days went by, they eased up. It really takes a lot off your shoulders when you talk to someone about your problems… That's how it was for these girls.

Kasumi and Fuki had Ami's back the entire time everyone else was picking on her. Of course, those days didn't last too long, once the rumors had come to Sakura's attention. Sakura was quite quick to debunk the rumors, being quite harsh to her classmates for even doing something so petty when it came to an incident that had sent her to the hospital.

"You just don't do that!" Sakura yelled as she clenched her tiny fists. "Shannaro!"

Ami was the last person that anyone would have ever expected Sakura to defend. Even Ami knew that herself, due to how surprised she looked when she watched the pink-haired girl yell at their classmates. It goes to show that Sakura wasn't holding any grudges.

Since that day, Ami took to stamping out any bullying attempts that caught her eye. She no longer just gave a damn whenever others targeted her friends—she was watching out for everyone, with the help of her friends.

…

It took some time, but the Academy life eventually slipped back into its usual routine. The tea ceremony was still a bitch to do (but not too difficult of a task to accomplish), I was everyone's hated opponent in sparring, Sakura was absolutely obsessed with medic-nin…

Wait, what?

So like, remember how Sakura talked non-stop about medic-nin on the day she returned, all healed up? Well, her enthusiasm about medic-nin had all but died down, days after her return. Soon, she could be seen reading books about medic-nin during lunchtime and even be heard bouncing off random trivia to Ino during kunoichi classes.

At this rate, Sakura might just end up becoming a medic-nin—it'd be a damn surprise if she didn't,
after all of that. Ino was certainly rather supportive of her friend's new interest, as was Suzume-sensei.

I'm honestly amazed at how this all had happened. Again, despite the deviations that have occurred, they even out in some ways. I'm honestly scared that deviations can even regulate themselves in the first place, because it just makes me question… How far can a deviation go before it normalizes?

I don't know…

Chapter End Notes

4-18-16 So like, more editing and a bigger expansion as well. I'm gonna say it right now, the thing with Ami, Fuki, and Kasumi is there for a reason. You get some world building as well, because equal opportunity is a thing, which, as of now, is actually canon. So yeah, if you think that whatever I'm doing with these three is pointless, as a reviewer had once said…you might want to think again…

Despite the changes that happen, in some way or form, they will even out. What makes it scarier is that things can deviate…but it'll normalize itself eventually in some way. What the point of normalization is exactly…it is a mystery. It can be from anything, from Naruto's hobby of water plants and pulling pranks, to Sakura's initiative to become a medic-nin.

As for Ami, Fuki, and Kasumi…they're very minor characters who have only showed up a few times in the Naruto series, but just because they're minor characters doesn't mean they're two-dimensional. Ami comes from a dysfunctional civilian family, Fuki's parents underestimate her because of her hearing disability, and Kasumi is an orphan who deals with issues back at the orphanage.

Sakura has not developed a crush on Sasuke because, due to being in a different class than him, Sakura doesn't know Sasuke the same way she would have, had she been in his class. The crush had no room for development, so Sakura stays friends with Ino.

Also, because I failed to do the math, I had to create an explanation as to why a fourteen going on fifteen-year-old GENIN Iruka would be teaching at the Academy, even though he is not a Chuunin…yet. So I talked it out with ChibiFoxAI and Iruka being an assistant instructor was what came out of it. Thing about instructors is they don't have to be Chuunin to be an instructor…they just have to be a Chuunin to be an official instructor. Take it or leave it, all I know is that I don't feel as stupid anymore for not knowing how to math…bluh.

Itachi still became a Chuunin at age ten…he just happened to be eleven years old when he returned to Konoha. And Iruka's birthday is May 26, so he became a Chuunin just shortly after he turned sixteen. I don't know why I picked Amegakure as the location where they took their Chuunin exams. I was just talking to ChibiFoxAI and I just randomly suggested the name and yeah… Thinking about it now, it could be my subconscious wishing for rain because we kinda need it here in California, what with this drought we have…

And if you guys weren't aware how slow I could be, I didn't make the Meirin from Kuroshitsuji correlation to Chōko until recently. The plan was for Chōko to go into
shurikenjutsu and taijutsu (might as well use advantage of that speed and strength). Keep in mind that Chôko was not originally a glasses-wearing girl. And the thing with hyperopia is that it is rarer than uncommon myopia (nearsightedness), which is the most common reason for vision correction.

Oh man, I have one more week to go until I'm out of school for winter break and just… ugh, I am mentally drained…I haven't even started any of my final exams, so just… eeugh, college. Anyways, that's it for now. I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! Until next time, everyone!
Kiba's sixth birthday was on Tanabata, which made the night out at the festival all the more interesting. Last year, it had rained on Tanabata, so the festival was cancelled. Not this time, though.

*Thankfully.*

Naruto and Sasuke were still competing against each other in the games, with Kiba including himself along in it. Chōji was eating and trying his best not to laugh as he watched me try to catch a goldfish. Shikamaru was being a smartass as he made a remark each time I failed (I failed *so* badly). Hinata was being the supportive friend she was, cheering me on each time I got so close to catching a goldfish with the poi. Neji and Shino were just watching. And Itachi...he was being our designated babysitter, because like *hell* anyone would trust Shisui with the responsibility.

*Hell no.*

After seeing me fail at least sixteen times (I'm one stubborn bitch), Neji took the unbroken poi out of my hand and pushed me aside. Less than a minute later, Neji handed me a plastic baggy containing the white goldfish he just won me.

*Show-off.*

I could've done it—ahaha, *no*. Who am I even trying to kid? I *suck* at the goldfish scooping game. I'm too impatient for it and I know that all too well. Hell, I'm actually *glad* Neji got me a goldfish...of which I was quick to name Yang. And so, apart from Shiro (who is still alive and swimming peacefully in a bowl at the Hyuuga compound), Yang is another commemoration of Neji's random act of kindness. Shisui refused to let Neji hear the end of it when it came to his attention at what the older Hyuuga had done. Neji glared at Itachi, who just smirked as he watched his cousin continue to tease the Hyuuga.

Neji kept his distance from me after winning me Yang. It was probably because he thought I was going to smack another sticker onto his forehead and I would have...but I ran out of them a few days ago and forgot to buy more. Of course, Neji didn't know that and I think I might have pulled a Pavlov's Dog on this kid.

*Oops...*

*Ahaha, didn't mean to do that...*

By the end of the night, Kiba had managed to get Sasuke and Naruto to team up against him and Shisui was still teasing Neji. The latter was nothing out of the usual, just another typical occurrence for our circle of friends.

The last event of the Tanabata festival was watching a play about the tale of Orihime and Hikoboshi, where two random people would get picked out to play the two characters. This year, the person picked to play Hikoboshi was actually Iruka-sensei, much to all of our surprise. And Orihime was to be played by, *of all people*, Mitarashi Anko. It was a pretty amusing sight, seeing Iruka-sensei acting all flustered and Anko finding the entire thing hilarious. Overall, it was a pretty memorable Tanabata...and I meant that in a good way.
A few days later, when Neji was least expecting it, I smacked a sticker onto his forehead. I startled him rather badly, as he nearly struck me in the face. Thankfully, I reacted fast enough to block his hand. He was not at all amused…but I was, even though I nearly got attacked for it. Though, since I didn't get hurt, I think I have every reason to laugh as Neji stares me down (why the fuck is he so tall?!) 

And so the teasing from Shisui ensued, because he saw the entire scene and kept prodding Neji in the cheek until he nearly got punched in the stomach.

…

…

On Sasuke’s sixth birthday, we spent the day training at the Uchiha compound dojo…because Shisui wanted all of us to be ready for when we returned to the Academy in the fall. Due to my hyperopia giving me a boost in improved aim, I made a rival out of myself for Sasuke. This, in turn, caused Naruto to feel jealous because he wanted to be the one to one-up Sasuke. 

Somehow, I found myself in a rivalry triangle as a result of this. It's a lot like a love triangle, except you replace the love with rivalry and you get rid of a whole lot of miscommunications and drama. Add in the exhaustion that most love triangles have and you have yourself a rivalry triangle.

Shisui honestly found it amusing as hell and I was just glad that Kiba decided to opt out of this situation, because of how often he likes to get involved in competitions. At the same time, I was also annoyed because I did not want to partake in this rivalry…like, at all. Because when I get competitive, I get competitive. I will swear and persevere so hard, it's honestly a miracle that I haven't exhausted myself just yet…even though I actually am exhausted.

Plot twist: I'm always exhausted!

The thing with me is, more often than not, I get too stubborn and choose not to give up. I will eventually give up, but how long that'll take is a good fucking question, because I honestly have no idea. It really depends on how long the opposing party wants to keep it up, as I demand rematch after rematch. I might give up first…or I might just make it through with sheer-determination because the other party got tired and gave up.

Meaning I might be able to go on for days…I am that bad of a rival.

No one wants that…no one.

Why else do you think Neji would push me aside and win those goldfishes for Hinata and me? It's because he got tired of watching me fail and persevere despite my constant failings. Because he can tell I'm the type of person who will keep going until something happens—anything. Again, it's that bad and I'm honestly glad Neji stepped in when he did, because I wouldn't have given up otherwise…

I have a serious problem with admitting defeat...

Thankfully, Itachi caught on as well and brought all attention back onto himself with his perfectly accurate aim and precise skill (holy fuck, life goals!). I have a long ways to go before I get on his level, but I don't mind. I'm just glad I won't exhaust myself because I got too damn competitive…or exhaust anyone in general.

Seriously, no one needs that.
Sasuke's sixth birthday was also the day Shisui introduced me to senbon. At the time, I didn't know where he got the senbon. I was just looking over one of the metal needles, taking in its length and the cool feel of the metal against my skin. I was starting to tune out Shisui, who was explaining how senbon worked, as I continued to look over the metal needle in my hand. Then I made probably one of the worst decisions ever (come on, brain—you're smarter than that!), by lightly tapping the ends with my index finger. Predictably, I pricked my finger in the process…like an idiot.

**Seriously, Shisui—why did you trust me with a weapon?!**

Shisui reacted all too quickly when he saw my bleeding index finger. "Chō-chan—what the hell?!"

"I don't know!" I wailed as Shisui took the senbon from me. "I wasn't thinking!"

"I can see that—try not to get blood on these!" Shisui grimaced as he wiped the bloodied needle on his shirt. "I need to make sure these senbon are all in one piece by the end of the day…"

"Well, you should have thought twice then, before giving them to Chōko," Shikamaru said as he wrapped a green handkerchief around my still-bleeding index finger.

I puffed up my cheeks as I pulled my finger away from Shikamaru. "Oh shut it!"

"Tsun-tsun!" Sasuke suddenly yelled from across the room, before yelping out in pain after his brother poked him in the forehead. "Ow!"

"Pay attention—we're in the middle of practice," Itachi firmly said.

Naruto started laughing then…only to immediately cease when Itachi poked him in the forehead. Itachi sure knows how to deal out forehead pokes…

*That are not meant to be taken lightly…*

"Anyways!" Shisui cleared his throat in an attempt to bring my attention back on him. He smiled widely as he placed a hand down on my head. "I'll get you your own set of senbon one of these days, just so you can practice. And since you probably weren't listening to me when I was explaining…"

I shifted uncomfortably in my spot when Shisui said this. I let out an annoyed whine when he suddenly ruffled my hair.

"Don't worry about that, Chō-chan—no hard feelings!" he laughed. "So as I was saying…let me repeat my earlier explanation about senbon—the thing about them is that they have little killing power."

I almost forgot that my future career as a kunoichi is going to involve killing… And just because of that description, I'm honestly liking the sound of senbon. "What else can they do?"

"If you have the proper medical knowledge, senbon can be used effectively to incapacitate or even kill." Shisui chuckled upon seeing me blanch. "Of course, you don't have the proper medical knowledge…doesn't hurt to know it, though."

"R-Riiight…" I laughed weakly as I forced a smile.

Shisui tilted his head to the side as he paused for a moment to think. "Hmm…I think we have a book about that around in our library?"
Why am I not surprised that Shisui's suggesting I read that book? Fuck it—I might as well read it… but before anything, there's one thing I want to know (it's starting to bug me). "Whose senbon are these?"

At that moment, from where we all stood, Mikoto's voice could be heard as she yelled, "Where are my senbon?!"

All attention immediately turned to Shisui, who was looking rather pale right now. His laughter was awkward and his smile was rather forced. "Ehehe, oops…I guess I should have asked?"

"You should run," Itachi was quick to say.

Shisui nodded his head in agreement. "I should."

"Okaa-saaaan! Shisui took 'em!" Sasuke yelled back, showing absolutely no remorse to Shisui, who looked so visibly betrayed in such a dramatic manner.

_Shisui can be a total drama queen at times…_

"Sasuke, you traitor—I thought we had something special!" Shisui held a hand over his heart as he frowned.

"We did…but then you took my dango and ate it." Sasuke was a vengeful little shit.

Shisui narrowed his eyes as he glared at Sasuke, his tone turning dark as he stated, "When this is all over, I _swear_—you are going to pay for this."

"SHISUIIIIII!" Mikoto's voice was both loud…and _too close for comfort_.

"Shouldn't you be running?" Sasuke smirked at Shisui.

"You little—Mikoto-san, how are you today on this lovely afternoon?" Shisui looked nervously at Mikoto and even forced a smile as he tried to play it cool.

Mikoto was not exactly in a good mood. She took one look at Shisui, taking note of the senbon in his possession, and said, "I'm giving you ten seconds to explain why you decided to take my senbon without asking."

"Well, you see…oh hey, someone's calling me!" Shisui got the hell out of dodge after that, with Mikoto closely following him as he ran out of the dojo. "Oh god, don't kill me!"

"Get back here, you little bastard!" Fucking hell, Mikoto—language!

_But isn't Shisui an actual bastard?_

Shut up, brain—let me have this moment! Gosh, I don't need the literal side of my head ruining any jokes being made …

_I've had enough of that in my past life…_

Jokes aside, there was just something funny about seeing a petite housewife chasing after a tall, teenaged Chuunin. It made more sense when I was later told that, back in the day before settling down as a housewife, Mikoto had used senbon during her kunoichi days. And because old habits die hard, Mikoto kept a set of senbon on her in case of emergencies.

As Shisui had taken Mikoto's senbon without her permission, Shisui had to endure a
rather long lecture from her after she had caught him (there's a reason she made it to Jounin). Afterwards, Shisui was forced to clean out the dojo all by himself as punishment. He was not in the happiest of moods when he approached Sasuke after all of that.

Of course, Shisui couldn't stay mad too long at Sasuke—not on his birthday, at the very least.

"You better watch your back starting tomorrow, though!" Shisui threatened Sasuke, who just laughed it off.

Sasuke would soon come to regret his laughter, as, come the next day, he was given a rather rude awakening in the form of him falling into Uchiha koi pond. Shisui had gotten his revenge (as petty as it was), Naruto couldn't be any more amazed by Shisui's prankster gambit (the blond idolized Shisui), and Sasuke learned the hard way about disproportionate retribution.

Honestly, this is just another day in the life of this circle of friends…

Circle of friends, circle of friends…

About a week after that, we were all let out of the Academy for the summer. Unlike last year, we all got summer homework for our regular classes this time around (curses!). As I had mentioned once before, we weren't going to learning how to throw shuriken and kunai until fall. Because of that, we were going to be tested on whether or not we could be trusted to handle such weapons for target practice, which was scheduled to begin a week after we returned from summer vacation.

And because Itachi and Shisui had us finish all of our summer homework before anything, our summer didn't begin until after the summer festival. At the very least, the summer festival was exactly what we needed after all of that homework. However, as we were all mentally exhausted from all that work (god damn, does the Academy not go easy on its students), we ended up missing out on the fireworks display because we had all passed out on the Hyuuga compound veranda.

Only Shisui, Itachi, and Neji had seen the fireworks.

The lucky bastards…

Still, it was a pretty fun night and breakfast at the Hyuuga compound was oddly not as intimidating as it could have been (like really, with those white eyes that tend to stare into your soul). Baby Hanabi was definitely the highlight of that morning, having rolled over for the first time.

Tea ceremony practice was still a thing and Neji was still the most unnerving practice guest I ever had (seriously, how the fuck is this boy the one making me nervous and not Itachi?!). I nearly dropped the bowl full of the green tea I had recently finished mixing, because Neji had startled me. It happened as I was just passing him the tea bowl. I was rather immersed in my work and he hadn't really said anything at all…so when he suddenly said I looked tense after such a long period of silence—yeah, it caught me badly by surprise. It was all an accident, but I still could have dropped a bowl full of hot tea and scalded someone.

Ouch!

Thankfully, that didn't happen because Neji kept me from dropping the bowl. Neither of us spoke to each other until after practice was over, as Neji felt rather bad for scaring me, and I was still recovering from the fright I gave myself when I nearly dropped the bowl.

Be still, my heart!

The best part about tea ceremony practice is, after all is done, we got to eat the candy-like sweets that
are served during these practice sessions. Though, unlike most sessions, Neji gave me his portion of his sweets. When I asked him why, Neji said nothing and just looked away. I guess this was his way of apologizing for nearly causing me to drop the tea bowl.

Aww, how cute—he's blushing!

I tried to smack a sticker onto Neji's forehead, but he ended up catching my hand, mere centimeters away from his forehead. He probably heard me snickering—it was a bit difficult to stay quiet, with how amused I was with his red face. Neji took the sticker from me, his hand still holding onto mine.

I stared at Neji for a good minute, my brown eyes staring into his featureless white. A small bead of sweat started to roll down the side of my face. This was becoming a rather nerve-wracking stare off. Neji seemed to have noticed, with how his expression suddenly softened. He sighed and placed the sticker onto his forehead afterwards.

"Happy?" he asked.

I would have said yes, buuut… "You're still holding my hand…"

"Oh—sorry…" Neji released my hand after that, his cheeks turning a light shade of red.

"Are you really?" Itachi was smirking. "You didn't do anything bad."

"I didn't ask you!" Neji glared at Itachi.

Hinata started laughing at that moment, and so did I. And just when Neji thought it couldn't get any worse, Shisui joined the mix. He had actually seen everything and started teasing Neji because of it.

"How precious!" Shisui laughed as he held Neji in a headlock. Neji struggled to get out, letting out a rather undignified whine when Shisui started giving him a noogie.

"Release me!" Neji protested as he continued to struggle.

Messing with Neji was just a fun thing to do when you knew how to do it correctly. I mean, he could technically end it was a well-aimed palm strike…but Neji just struggles without relying too much on force (at least, for now—he still has his limits). I'm honestly amazed at how much he has tolerated Shisui, Itachi, Hinata, and me.

Still, it's nice seeing how far he has come since the Kagome Kagome incident. I can't believe it's only been a year since the incident… He rarely smiles, but the fact that he even smiles is a milestone within itself.

Such a precious smile, too…

And like the previous year, summer soon came to an end. Classes began with homework being turned in and a review on how to handle weapons (it was as boring as it sounded). I'd never thought I'd actually welcome an exam—like ever.

But I did…and the whole class passed that exam, so target practice immediately ensued after that. The tea ceremony exam wasn't too difficult and I think it's safe to say that, by now, I have grown accustomed to sitting in seiza while wearing a kimono. All I can even say is hell fucking yes.

About damn time…

Embroidery lessons began after that and dear god, my eyes! Never have I ever had to adjust my
glasses so many times before until then, and it was all so I could thread a fricken' needle. I already know I'm not going to have a fun time because of my shitty vision problems, but I'll be damned if I don't even try! I just need to pass, so I can avoid remedial lessons!

Between regular classes and kunoichi classes, I had to go from taking off my glasses in order to take advantage of my hyperopia to relying on them so my needlework can stay consistent. It was hell…but on the bright side, I was at the top of the class for my precise accuracy!

Sasuke was right behind me after that, much to his annoyance, but he dealt with it…because he and Naruto were now at it against each other, as usual, with Kiba trying to get in on it, only for Shino to start acting a bit more assertive and keeping the Inuzuka from intruding on the rivalry between Naruto and Sasuke.

Hinata had to act as a peacekeeper to prevent Kiba from attacking Shino in order to establish dominance. It's funny how close the Inuzuka are in behavior to their canine companions. I think the same can apply to the Aburame and their insects.

Also, can I just say that this early Team Kurenai interaction is adorable? Though, now that I've mentioned it, all we're really missing is Ino in order to complete the Ino-Shika-Chō trio that makes up Team Asuma and Sakura for Team Kakashi…thinking of it now, is Sakura still in the run for Team Kakashi?

I have a really bad feeling that she isn't—I mean, the day she was placed in a different class should have said something, but I'm still hoping! Maybe she'll transfer to our class! Yeah, that's a positive thought!

I am so in denial...

...

During one embroidery class, I found out that Fuki had recommended Sakura to her parents and because of that, Sakura had already started medic-nin training. I wished her luck, because Sakura seems really happy about her medic-nin training and dedicated as well. She'll certainly become a valuable teammate to her future team at this rate…I like the sound of that thought.

Yeah, Sakura is definitely a valuable person...

Shikamaru's sixth birthday was, much like last year, just another typical day at the Nara compound…except Shisui was there. And Shisui was definitely welcomed by Yoshino, because Shisui knew how to worm his way into your heart if you let him. I'm not sure whether that's a good thing or a bad thing… All I know that the way he did it wasn't done with ill intentions, so it shouldn't be anything relatively negative.

...

...

I'm pretty sure the Sandaime was a tad bit pained to see that he had to pay for yet another person when he took all of us out to Ichiraku Ramen for Naruto's birthday. It was around that time that we also found out Shisui was turning fourteen nine days later. Both he and Naruto were quite happy to find out how close their birthdays were to each other.

"Birthday buddies!" Shisui exclaimed as he ruffled Naruto's hair. "That's what we are!"

"Hell yeah, dattebayo!" Naruto was smiling widely.
Naruto's birthday was later spent at the Uchiha compound, with Mikoto having taken charge of handling his birthday party. A repeat of last year's birthday party occurred, minus Naruto crying out of happiness—he was mostly just smiling and laughing. It was a good day for Naruto all-around.

And nine days after Naruto's birthday, Shisui abducted us during class and took us all out for dango—yes, he took us out during class. Iruka-sensei was not happy, but Shisui didn't give a damn. It was his birthday and for his birthday, he wanted all of us to skip school. I nearly had a freak-out because I was missing class, like holy crap, no. Take me back, dammit!

Oh god, I'm not used to skipping classes!

MY PERFECT ATTENDENCE—NOOO!

I'm honestly wondering how a fourteen-year-old Chuunin managed to successfully abduct eight children during class. He even managed to get Neji, of all people, out of his class! It wasn't even lunchtime…

How the fuck—

I'm starting to see how Shisui later got into ANBU. Speaking of ANBU, when is Itachi getting in? Wasn't he like…eleven when that happened? Well, I guess that should be happening soon, then…unless a deviation occurred. Of course, the deviation will eventually normalize itself. Just…shit be confusing.

It's bananas!

"Oh god, we are so screwed when Iruka-sensei finds out…" In the meantime, I was freaking out and oh man, he probably found out already!

"Calm down, Chō-chan!" Shisui said as he patted me on the back. "Have some dango."

"I already am…” Mitarashi dango and chadango (green tea flavored dango) are amongst my favorite types of dango. I'm at least happy I'm eating something to make up for the empty feeling that comes from skipping classes—how the hell is everyone doing so well?! Even Hinata and Neji are doing better than I am and they are model students—at least, I can only assume Neji is a model student.

Oh god, Shisui is such a bad influence on us!

Itachi, why are you not doing anything about this?!

"You know how Shisui is," Itachi replied as he ruffled my hair. "You might as well just sit back and let it happen."

I hate you, Itachi…you could at least try. Oh dango, you're my only support in this time of need.

Never leave me…

I just realized something. I never watched Clannad, the anime that all my college buddies were having feels for. Now I will never find out why they were having so many feels! And now as I eat my mitarashi dango, I'm having regrets.

So many regrets…

I'm sad to say that all I know about the anime is this fucking song about dango, or a big dango family—whatever! And now, here I am, humming the damn song…
"That's a nice tune you got there!" Oh, shit, Shisui heard me!

"You heard nothing!" God dammit, Chōko, just bring attention to yourself in this damn dango shop, why don't you?!

"Oh, what do we have here?" Oh hell—you're here, too, Anko?! Oh, the irony of eating mitarashi dango while *Mitarashi* Anko is right in the vicinity—will it ever end?!

*It probably won't...*

At least dango is pretty tasty... "Hey!"

"I'll take that!" Anko says with a wide smile on her face as she jacks my dango. "So, care to tell me why a bunch of children are skipping class today?"

All attention immediately turned to Shisui, who just laughed it off. "C'mon, it's my birthday today!—I'll buy you dango."

"...I'm listening..." Anko said before eating one of the dango on the skewer. She pulled out a chair and sat right next to the birthday boy himself, giving his hair a light ruffle. "So, happy birthday, Shisui—how old are you again?"

"You really wound me..." Shisui feigned a pained expression. "The least you can do is pretend you remember!"

"Oh suck it up—you've been through worse!" Anko laughed as she playfully shoved Shisui.

"Don't remind me..." Itachi sighed.

It was certainly an interesting birthday for Shisui...and about an hour later, Iruka-sensei found us and dragged our asses back to the Academy after giving Shisui a firm scolding. Though, not without a little bit of teasing from Anko, whom was still laughing at the memory of her and Iruka-sensei playing Orihime and Hikoboshi in the Tanabata festival parade. Iruka-sensei went a little easier on us after that, having been a bit too flustered upon being reminded of such a memory. I could tell that Anko was having fun messing with Iruka-sensei.

... somehow, none of us got detention for Shisui's little stunt. Our parents weren't notified and just... this could have been worse. Immediately after classes, however, Shisui grabbed all of us and took us to the Uchiha compound for target practice. Shisui took the time to introduce me to the senbon set he received on his birthday.

"Now you have your own set!" Shisui was grinning widely, his onyx black eyes lit up with joy.

I blinked a few times. "Uh...isn't it supposed to be your birthday?"

"Well, *excuse* me for wanting to be a helpful friend!" Shisui huffed in a rather dramatic manner. "So it's my birthday—sure, I could keep this senbon set to myself, ooorr...I could be a nice guy and use it to help you out since Mikoto-san has banned me from ever touching her senbon."

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... somehow, none of us got detention for Shisui's little stunt. Our parents weren't notified and just...
I'm honestly glad that kunoichi classes are still focusing on embroidery, with regular sewing on the side. At the same time, I hate it...because my eyes. Why couldn't I have myopia? At least my hyperopia makes up for itself during target practice in normal classes... I'm also doing well in tajutsu and I am honestly amazed that I have yet to break my glasses.

*Let's hope I didn't jinx myself...*

For all the struggle I endured with embroidery and sewing, I got a decent grade in the exam. Hard work and effort makes a difference, apparently. I keep forgetting that Suzume-sensei was also including effort into scoring.

What came after embroidery and sewing was cooking. I already knew I was going to do well in class, because Mama has already started teaching me how to cook and I was progressing well. According to Suzume-sensei, we were going to be focusing on cooking until winter vacation, as cooking was something that was both a useful everyday skill to have and a weapon, if done right. Of course, we weren't going to be focusing on the latter part until next year. All Suzume-sensei wanted to do, for now, was introduce us to the basics so we have an idea for next year.

Target practice continued in our regular classes, with our aim and throwing distance improving the more often we did it. Shuriken were added into the mix, whereas before, we were just focusing on kunai. The difference between shuriken and kunai, apart from appearance, is that kunai are larger and heavier, the grip could be used in hand-to-hand combat more readily (we haven't gotten to including weapons in sparring yet, but we will eventually, according to Iruka-sensei), and it could also be used for climbing. There was also a difference in holding each weapon, which I noticed immediately upon the many numerous times I've accidentally cut myself on a shuriken as I pulled it out of the target.

*Like a dumbass!*

Also, here's an interesting fact about the world of *Naruto*... English exists. Like, seriously, it *exists*... but here's the catch: It's a shinobi language. Only *shinobi* are allowed to learn the language and, furthermore, you have to be an Academy student to start learning the language. This is the reason why Neji, Itachi, and Shisui haven't mentioned anything about it to us until we reached the subject in class. They started helping us out the exact moment we started learning the language.

The reason why it's even taught in the first place is to have a second language to depend on in the presence of civilians, who wouldn't otherwise know what the language even is. It's also one way to officially tell the difference between a shinobi and a civilian. And to become an instructor or a Jounin, you had to be fluent in the language.

*Talk about prerequisites.*

That aside, guess who did well in English? If you guessed me, then you're absolutely right! For the first time, since target practice, I did better than Sasuke! Of course, I cheated in the sense that, in my past life, English was one of the languages I grew up speaking, with Spanish being right after it. Though, while English was easy to learn (for me), I had to be freaking careful about it because it was a language everyone in class was learning.

So I had to purposely flub a few parts in order to make it seem as if I wasn't completely fluent. To everyone else, I was just a fast-learner and I wanted to keep it that way, because the last thing I
needed was unwanted attention. It probably helps that, as Academy students learning the language, we're allowed to get help from our families and connections, assuming they are shinobi. This is where it paid to have friends who came from shinobi families if one wasn't born in one. Naruto was certainly doing well to an extent as a result of his many connections. It also probably helped that Iruka-sensei was helping him out as well…

One of the things I learned is that it wasn't uncommon for shinobi who have already graduated from the Academy to sometimes stay behind just a little longer in order to improve their English. In certain cases, shinobi who stay longer at the Academy are usually those who are placed in the Genin Reserves, which usually happens when a class has an uneven number of graduates.

Uneven graduates make it difficult for the formation of teams, which is why the Genin Reserves exist, for keeping potential Genin reserved until an available team is found for them.

It was certainly a lot of information to retain, but it somehow stuck with me. And up until the day we graduated from the Academy, English was going to be a language we were going to be learning. Naruto was annoyed, Shikamaru considered it troublesome, Chōji was concerned, Shino was calm and collected, as was Hinata, Kiba was just irritated, Sasuke had potentially met his problem subject, and I was just going to be having to watch myself from now on. This is definitely going to be a fun six to seven years…

November soon passed and December brought us to Hinata's sixth birthday. Most of it was spent passing nine-month-old Hanabi around. And when she wasn't being held, she was crawling on the tatami mat floor. Shisui had a fun time trying to get Hanabi to say something, as Hanabi, for a nine-month-year-old baby, was a little behind on speaking skills…in comparison to Hinata, who was six months old when she had said her first word. Of course, everyone is different, Shino argued, which is honestly true.

That still didn't stop Shisui from trying to get his name to be the very first thing Hanabi will say. From there on, it turned into a bit of a game to see if anyone could get Hanabi to say anything at all. And when Hiashi decided to check up on us, to make sure we weren't corrupting his precious baby girl (the other one—the nine-month-old baby whose name meant fireworks), Hanabi finally spoke…

And guess what it was that she said?

"Nawu!" Hanabi exclaimed, her tiny hands flailing around as she reached out to a spiky-haired blond. "Nawu-nawu!"

Immediately, all attention was on Naruto, who was blushing as Hanabi reached out for him as she called for him in the best way a nine-month-old who had just started speaking could. Hinata placed Hanabi onto the floor, where she was quick to crawl all the way over to Naruto, who was just stunned that something like this was even happening. Hanabi tugged on Naruto's shirt a few times before Naruto found the courage to pick her up.

Hanabi squealed as she loudly exclaimed, "Nawu-nawu!"

"N-Naruto," Naruto found himself correcting Hanabi. "Naruto."

"Nawu-to," Hanabi repeated in the best way she could. "Nawu-to…"

Naruto smiled nervously and sighed. "Close enough."

"Nawu-nawu!" Hanabi went back to calling Naruto the name she had been referring to him by. It
was probably easier for her.

Hiashi had stayed a moment longer to watch Naruto as he handled the nine-month-old baby, who kept calling the blond-haired boy's name every few moments or so. Afterwards, Hiashi left, saying nothing whatsoever to us. Hinata waited a few minutes before suggesting that we all teach Hanabi how to say father.

When Hiashi decided Hanabi had spent enough time with us kids and walked into the room to pick her up, Hanabi was babbling, "Tou-tou" to him. It certainly caught Hiashi by surprised and I'm honestly amazed that none of us laughed…

We all did laugh once we were sure Hiashi was out of earshot when he had left the room with Hanabi.

*Best…sixth birthday…ever!*

It was certainly one we weren't going to be forgetting any time soon and that was freaking awesome.

…

…

The New Year came, with last year's events repeating themselves in how Naruto spent it at the Uchiha compound, where I'm pretty sure he and Shisui set off a number of pranks on the older Uchiha. Sasuke was certainly laughing as he told us what happened the day we returned to the Academy for classes. Naruto looked smug, Shikamaru seemed amused, and Chōji was wondering how Naruto managed to get out in one piece. Hinata had been listening intently, as had Shino, who had a small smile on his face, Kiba was honestly impressed, and I was wondering just how Shisui and Naruto were even capable of pulling off so many pranks in the first place.

*How the frick did Fugaku not put an end to it?*

Did he secretly enjoy them? It certainly seems like it from the way Naruto and Shisui got away with it all.

"Shisui-nii is the best, dattebayo!" Naruto grinned widely.

Shisui-nii…?

*That's new…*

I guess they're *that* close, huh? Ahaha, that's good to hear. I hadn't been the only one to notice the addition Naruto had made to Shisui's name. Shino had picked up on it as well and even asked Naruto about it. All Naruto did was blush as he rubbed the back of his head and grinned as he usually did. He just seemed so happy.

And when we were all invited over the Aburame compound for Shino's seventh birthday, Naruto seemed even happier, what with the greenery surrounding all of us. Naruto always enjoyed visiting the Aburame compound. Shino had picked up on Naruto's interest in gardening and had gotten the blond a couple of potted plants for his sixth birthday. Naruto always makes it a habit to mention the condition of said plants to Shino, much to Shino's amusement. I could tell that Shino was happy.

Shino’s seventh birthday had been a pretty memorable day, full of helping Shino tend for the greenery surrounding the compound. It wasn't boring—in fact, it was rather relaxing. I would have enjoyed it, had I not been worried about one thing.
Shino just turned seven years old…soon, the rest of us, with the exception of Neji, Itachi, and Shisui, would be turning seven as well. Along with that, Itachi would soon be turning twelve…

Time was running out and unless a deviation had occurred, then in less than two years, the Uchiha Clan Massacre will occur.

I initially thought I had two years, but the truth was that I had miscounted…I had an extra year, so three years in total. Or at least until Itachi turned thirteen. Still, will the extra time do anything at all to change events that have yet to come? Or will that be the point of normalization?

I don't know…

I just don't know…

Chapter End Notes

3-30-18 EDITS STILL GOING ON AND I HAVE CREATED A STRAWPOLL FOR THE SHIPPING GAMES!! FEEL FREE TO CHECK IT OUT HERE!!

4-18-16 Have some more edits, as I try to recover from the massive amount of feels I still have from the fact Homestuck has ended! Still waiting for that damn epilogue!

So, despite the fact that I was distracted by playing Pokémon Omega Ruby (saving Alpha Sapphire for later), I somehow managed to finish this chapter so fast. Yeah, go figure…but seriously, if you don’t hear anything from me in a couple of days, it's because Pokémon is taking over my life…THAT, and I still have a week left of finals to go. Wish me luck, everyone!

Oh, and the thing about English…yeah, one thing I’ve noticed is that English is never usually brought up, despite the fact that I have clearly heard Maito Guy yell out, “DYNAMIC ENTRY” in English…in the original version. So I started thinking, what if English is a shinobi-exclusive language? I think I recall reading that Kumogakure has techniques that are in English or something? Ehhh, my memory is failing me right now, but yeah…English be a thing. It's used to separate civilians and shinobi. It's basically code for shinobi.

And the whole, "Jounin having to be fluent in English" just comes from, once again, Gai’s "DYNAMIC ENTRY!" Yeah, blame him for that. I just needed a reason to explain Gai…ahaha.

Genin Reserves are a thing, which usually puts graduates in reserve in case there isn't a team ready for them to be placed on. Usually meant to counter the problem of uneven graduates, like, say for once instance, only one person out of the entire class managed to graduate. You can't create a team out of that one person, so you just put that person on reserve until an actual team can be made.

Sakura is like six-years-old and is already training to become a medic-nin. Just because she's started training won't mean she won't make it to Genin…no, it just means Sakura will already have medic-nin training by the time she makes Genin, thus making her an
extremely valuable member to her future team…and I honestly like the sound of that. Honestly, I like the way Sakura is developing, here.

Shisui and Naruto are close, Anko made an appearance in this chapter, Hanabi said her first word, and Chōko (like me) can't do math sometimes. Remember how she said that two years wasn't a lot? That was supposed to have been three, so that's one extra year Chōko has, but it still isn't a lot of time…and even then, remember how things eventually even out? More time might be even worse, if you think about it.

So I hope nothing was too confusing, because the entire English thing took me some time to think out, like seriously. I'm honestly proud that I'm at least trying to tackle it. Hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! Until next time, everyone!
The last few months of classes, both regular and kunoichi, weren't too noteworthy. Most of it was just review—kunoichi classes especially. We were eventually let out of the Academy for spring vacation, thus marking the end of another school year.

Hanabi's first birthday was spent with all of us somehow sneaking the one-year-old girl out of the Hyuuga compound for a day out in Konoha. Itachi and Shisui were absent, the two probably on a mission or something, which was usually the reason they were absent from our group, as of recently. Now that I think about it, they've been absent a lot as of lately… but I digress.

Anyways, with Itachi and Shisui absent, the fact that we managed to sneak Hanabi out of the Hyuuga compound without anyone noticing us is quite the achievement.

_Oh man, we are so getting in trouble after this!_

Neji is certainly panicking about it, but Hinata is being the reassuring cousin and telling him everything is going to be fine. I honestly have never been so amused in seeing Hinata being the calm one and Neji being the complete opposite.

_Oh how the tables have turned!_

Man, I wish Itachi were here to see this. He'd get a kick out of this—Shisui, too.

_I miss that beautiful bastard…_

…

I should have expected something to change within our lives in response to Itachi and Shisui's constant absences. For the most part, they were present whenever our birthdays came up, with the exception of Itachi missing his own birthday (and Shisui being suspiciously absent as well).

I did _not_ let Itachi hear the end of that. I told him to worry about himself for once, as he was part of this group of friends and as friends, we were there for each other in some way or form on our birthdays. Itachi had never looked so intimidated to be lectured by a tiny seven-year-old girl…

"You gotta listen to Chō-chan, Itachi!" Shisui laughed as he elbowed Itachi's side. "Leader's orders!"

"I refuse!" I still refuse that title, and you guys all know it!

"Yet you still act the part," Itachi argued.

"Sh-Shut up!" I snapped, my face heating up with a rather harsh blush.

"Tsun-tsun!" Sasuke exclaimed with a wide smile on his face.

And on that day, I dealt with a chorus of "Tsun-tsun!" from all of my friends as they playfully teased me. What should have been me just calling out Itachi for missing his own birthday, became something else. Itachi at least apologized, by sneaking up behind me and lifting me off the ground. I shrieked as I soon found myself sitting on Itachi's shoulders.
"I'll try to be there next time..." he simply said as he started to walk away from the others.

"O-Okay—please don't drop me..." I nervously responded before letting out a high-pitched shriek as Itachi suddenly started running, the others following after us as an impromptu game of modified tag began. "Itachiiiiiiii!

"Run while you can, you two!" Shisui exclaimed as he carried Naruto on his shoulders. "We're gonna get you!"

"No mercy, dattebayo!" Naruto laughed.

What is my life to deserve this?!

…

…

Kiba's seventh birthday soon came up, with both Shisui and Itachi being present. That will forever be known as the day that Shisui would not stop teasing Kiba about being seven on the seventh day of the seventh month. Tanabata means "evening of the seventh" and as a result, the nickname Nanazuka, was born.

That is such a bad pun...

But it sure stuck on! Birthdays aside, Shisui always made sure to use any of his spare time to help us train when the Academy started teaching us how to use our chakra. The same went with Itachi, who started giving me tips on shurikenjutsu, while Sasuke continued to struggle with improving his Goukakyuu. Shisui was usually helping Naruto, who was having trouble with chakra control exercises.

This was usually how our days were spent, as Shisui and Itachi weren't the only ones who were absent. Hinata and Neji now had their own training regimen to focus on, as did Shino, Kiba, Shikamaru, and Chōji. Why Chōji and I had separate training regimen (or lack thereof, in my case) can easily be summed up as me being barred from learning our clan's techniques. You can thank my fast metabolism for that, but I don't really mind. I'm muuuch more interested in shurikenjutsu...

I say, as I try to ignore the empty feeling in my chest...

It feels rather lonely without Chōji around, just knowing that I won't be learning the same techniques as him because of how different my body is from his... I can say the same thing for the rest of our absent friends. I guess that's the price of being friends with clan children.

I'm honestly surprised that the Uchiha don't have their own training regimen—then again, Fugaku has been paying more and more attention on Itachi as of lately. How I even know this, is all thanks to Sasuke voicing his complaints to Naruto and I. Ha, it's rather sad how our circle of friends now has a tendency to turn into a trio or a quintet (should Shisui and Itachi be present) after classes.

Soemptysoempty...

Any free time we all had together was now spent at Naruto's place, even if it was only for homework. Naruto's place had turned into a refuge for all of us, as his place was the only place that was completely free from our clans' influence of any sorts. We...usually found ourselves waking up the next day, piled up on Naruto's bed. It was an occurrence that happened quite often.

At the very least, Naruto's apartment was always clean as a result of our continuous visits... And on
Sasuke's seventh birthday, we all booked it to Naruto's place, with little Hanabi in hand. I'm amazed at how often we could all sneak past the adults without them noticing (Byakugan be damned). Of course, this time around, Shisui and Itachi were around and, all I can say, the two are definitely now in ANBU.

Itachi is now twelve, and his and Shisui's absences happened often enough to fit the criterion… Although I'm not too sure about the absences, but Itachi's age does say a lot.

It's all I have for a reference, anyways...

Shisui was fast asleep on Naruto's bed, with a sleeping Hanabi in his arms. Itachi was trying to keep a watchful eye on all of us, as we all just laid on the floor, with our gaze focused on the ceiling. We were just so exhausted…

Itachi says that this was a typical reaction to learning how to use chakra. Neji and Hinata were tired for different reasons that involve their clan's kekkei genkai and the training that came along with it. And Shisui and Itachi are probably in the process of getting used to the ANBU life. Again, Itachi is twelve.

By the end of an hour, we were all asleep. We woke up late in the evening, rather sluggish and somewhat pained from sleeping on the floor—save for Shisui, who was smart enough to have laid on the bed when he did before he had fallen asleep.

That lucky bastard!

Due to our unexplained absence to everyone else, a search team had been sent out to look for us…or so we were told. The search team was called off when an anonymous source confirmed our location at Naruto's apartment. The fact that the aforementioned source explicitly mentioned that we were all asleep certainly implied something…and what exactly would that be?

We are being watched…

Someone was keeping close tabs on all of us. It was a pretty freaky thought, but then I found myself looking at Naruto and then at Shisui and Itachi. It took me a couple of minutes to put two and two together before realizing that the anonymous source was someone from ANBU, who had been tasked with watching over Naruto (why else would they be there?). It's honestly the only explanation I can even consider that sounds valid.

None of us got into any trouble for the stunt (somehow) and once the Academy let us out for summer vacation, training regimens were loosened for our usually absent friends (Hinata, Neji, Chōji, Shikamaru, Kiba, and Shino), and Shisui and Itachi were often present, instead of absent… I have a feeling the Sandaime must have heard about our sleeping escapades during Sasuke's birthday…

It's nice to see that everyone understands the concept of stress and exhaustion.

I'm amazed that Hiashi decided to give Neji and Hinata a break… Maybe this is his way of showing how much he cares for his daughter and nephew. I think that's cute.

I'm just too exhausted to even question why I think it's cute… It just is…

On the day of the summer festival, the thought of our little friend in the shadows (what I like to refer to the ANBU watching over Naruto as) following us as we sat down on the Hyuuga compound veranda to watch the fireworks crossed my mind. I know the ANBU was just doing their job, but
still—it's kinda unnerving to know that someone is watching you in the dark. Just, ugh…I wish I hadn't even thought that.

God dammit, Chōko…

"Is something wrong, Chōko-san?" Neji seems to have noticed my distress.

"Do you ever get the feeling you're being watched?" It's honestly a question I've always wondered…

"Oh, you've noticed him too, huh?" Naruto, I was not expecting you to say that.

"Wh-What do you mean by that, Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked, somewhat nervously.

Naruto laughed awkwardly as he rubbed the back of his head. "Well, a while back, I saw this guy sneaking around my place while I was watering the plants. I don't know who he is, but ever since that day, I've noticed that he's been following me. I don't know why, though…"

"How long has this been occurring?" Shino asked.

Naruto tilted his head to the side. "Hell if I know…I just noticed him recently. I tried talking to him, but he likes to pretend he's not there, even though I know he's THERE, DATTEBAYO!"

Naruto's voice echoed as he looked throughout the Hyuuga compound courtyard. He was probably looking for our little friend in the shadows. I'm wondering why I haven't done so either.

"That's creepy," Sasuke remarked as he made a face. "Nii-san, should we be scared?"

"No." Itachi shook his head. "There is no need to be alarmed."

"It's probably someone just looking out for you, Naruto." Shisui grinned as he reached over to ruffle Naruto's hair. "You're that important, you know."

"Shisui-nii!" Naruto laughed and tackled Shisui into a hug.

I can't help but smile as I look at these two. Unlike last year, we didn't fall asleep, so we actually got to watch the fireworks together. I don't know why, but I can never tire of watching the colorful sparks light up the night sky. It takes my mind off of certain things…

…

And like the years before, summer vacation soon came to an end. Classes began again at the Academy and the days went by as usual, with Shikamaru's seventh birthday coming and going. Naruto's seventh birthday was held at the Uchiha compound once more and was forever commemorated by Shisui's gift in the form of a book called, Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi. When I first saw the title, I found it familiar, but I didn't know why…then Shisui made a comment.

"I found this while I was at the bookstore and as I was skimming through the pages, I came across a character who reminded me of you!" Shisui grinned at Naruto.

It was at this moment that I realized that Shisui just gave Naruto the first book that Jiraiya, one of Konohagakure's legendary Sannin, had ever wrote. Said book was also the origin point of where Naruto got his name from his parents and how Jiraiya ended up as his godfather. I'm…honestly overwhelmed with how this ended up happening.

Geez fricken' Louise, Shisui, just...wow.
Naruto was very much tempted to read the book, but then he looked at Shisui and asked, "Can you read it to us, Shisui-nii?"

Shisui blinked and rubbed the back of his head as a nervous smile crossed his face. "Well…only one chapter, okay?"

And that was how story time with Shisui became a thing. I had a nostalgia wham when Shisui told us to gather around in a circle for story time. I couldn't help but recall my high school band teacher, who would usually tell the entire class during a football game to gather up for "story time" in order to tell us the plan before our half-time show.

I still miss my past life…

Although, it was just as nice, being able to experience moments like these in this new life of mine. In this new life, where I have new memories to recall, years from now, into the future, with a smile on my face. The memory of seeing Naruto smile as Shisui started reading the *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi*, with his own flair…

I'll never forget this…

Shisui is seriously a dork, but he's a good person. And even though they weren't related by blood, Shisui was the best brother he could ever be to Naruto…and to the rest of us, as much as we'd like to deny.

We don't mean what we say, after all…

When Shisui turned fifteen a few days later, he pulled the same crap as he did last year…except Iruka-sensei anticipated it this time around and had Shisui join us for a class presentation. It was a pretty fun presentation that Shisui seemed to really enjoy it…even if his forehead *did* get pelted with chalk (courtesy of Iruka-sensei and his deadly aim).

"Best. Birthday. Ever!" Shisui told us moments before story time commenced. We certainly had a laugh about that. Naruto sure did…

…

Sometimes, Shisui wasn't always able to read to us, as story time was only once a week (with the exception of his birthday week, where he read to us twice) and was limited to one chapter a session. Shisui and Itachi were in ANBU and with classes and training regimens in the way… Time had to be prioritized. At least we weren't as exhausted as we had been before summer vacation.

Our bodies, by now, have grown used to using chakra…to an extent. It was just to the point where we weren't so exhausted and prone to falling asleep on Naruto's bed, as we had done in the month before we were let out for summer vacation. That still doesn't mean we stopped doing that. Our families had just grown used to hearing from an anonymous source about our sleeping escapades (I *assume*, considering the lack of comments I hear from Mama nowadays). Seriously, though, who the hell is it that is watching over Naruto?

I have no fucking clue…

When Iruka-sensei started introducing us to traps, you can bet that Naruto was quick to use them to try and catch our little friend in the shadows. He tried using ramen as bait…only to later find the bowl of ramen empty and the trap dismantled. Naruto was *beyond* pissed initially…but then it came to our attention that, with the trap dismantled and the bowl empty, that meant someone *was* watching over us.
So joke's on that punk!

Still, our little friend in the shadows is one smart motherfucker…with a sense of humor. He didn't have to dismantle the trap and eat the ramen, but he did—that was part of the reason Naruto was so mad. Now Naruto was determined to catch our little friend in the shadows. And Shisui was willing to help.

Hoo boy, you better watch out, friend…

…

In mid-November, we spent an afternoon at the Hyuuga compound courtyard. The trees were full of colorful leaves that slowly fell to the ground in a dance-like motion. On some days, we played in the leaves, but today was an entirely different story altogether. Shisui was gathering a pile of the fallen leaves for this occasion while the rest of us wrapped sweet potatoes in tinfoil.

We were going to be making a fire with the pile of fallen leaves and use it to bake the sweet potatoes we had. There's nothing like bonding with friends over baked sweet potatoes.

Don't fight me on this one!

Itachi was going to use the Goukakyuu to light the pile of leaves on fire, but then Sasuke butted in, proclaiming he wanted to do it instead. Itachi, being the best brother he could ever be, allowed his little brother to do so. A wide smile crossed Sasuke's face as he quickly went through the hand seals for the Goukakyuu. The flame that came out of his mouth was still rather weak, but not as weak as it had been previously.

I don't think I can ever get tired of seeing Sasuke act like a Charmander…

One day, he'll be a glorious Charizard…

Or whatever fire-type Pokémon fits Sasuke the best. The fire lizard is just what pops into my head most of the time…even though a Torchic would probably fit Sasuke the best. I mean, his hair puffs up like the backside of a chicken—and I don't mean that in a bad way. I find it rather adorable…

It's just so cute to me…

As Chōji, Kiba, Neji, Sasuke, Shikamaru, Shino, and I each ate a baked sweet potato of our own, we watched Naruto try and help Hinata get her own baked sweet potato from the burning pile of leaves. It was pretty entertaining to watch, since Naruto was having such a hard time taking a baked sweet potato out of the pile.

"Do you need any help?" I offered.

"I got this-ttebayo!" Naruto insisted as he continued trying to take out the baked sweet potato. Part of the reason why he was having such a hard time was that the potato was bigger than the rest, making it rather heavy to take out without the stick breaking because of its weight. "I…got…this!"

No you don't.

After watching Naruto struggle for about three minutes, Shisui decided to help out his little brother and was the one who gave Hinata her baked sweet potato. Naruto stared at Shisui for a good minute before crossing his arms and pouting childishly. Hinata laughed at the sight, finding Naruto rather adorable. She was giggling when she gently patted Naruto on the head, telling him that he at least tried. This caused Naruto to blush, his face turning even redder when Shisui started teasing him.
Not knowing how to react, Naruto started poking at a random potato in the burning leaf pile with a stick. His excuse for doing so was that he was trying to see if the other potatoes were ready.

*Sure you were, you shy little boy…*

*…*

On the eve of Hinata's seventh birthday, Shisui and Naruto managed to catch us a member of ANBU! The ANBU, in particular, possessed a slim, muscular build and had short, silver hair with ends that spiked towards the left. A white mask with the appearance of that of a dog obscured his face and though we could not see his face, it was quite easy to say that our little friend in the shadows was pissed.

Shisui and Naruto were laughing their asses off as the ANBU glared at them as best as he could while wearing a mask. Kiba, Sasuke, and I were laughing just as hard, because the situation was just so humorous. Shikamaru, Chōji, Shino, and Neji were just *shocked*, various expressions of astonishment crossing their faces. Hinata was trying her best to stifle her laughter, a few giggles escaping here and there. And Itachi was just staring, his onyx black eyes somewhat wide and his expression not as blank as it could have been.

I could only assume that our little friend in the shadows was going to give Shisui and Itachi hell for this little incident. Especially after what had happened when Sasuke brought up the fact that not everyone who looks male *is* male when everyone had been so quick to refer to the ANBU by pronouns that denoted such. Naruto had been quick to apologize to the ANBU, referring to him by, "Nee-san."

Our little friend in the shadows looked absolutely done as he turned his attention to Shisui, who was laughing so hard, he was crying. "No, Naruto—you had it right before!"

"Although, Sasuke is also right…" Itachi added as he placed his hand on top of Sasuke's head. "But for this situation, we also had it right as well."

"How troublesome!" Shikamaru sighed as he scratched his head.

Our little friend in the shadows seemed to be thinking the same thing, with the way he groaned in such an irritated manner. He seemed so close to bashing the back of his head against the bark of the tree that was behind him. There really wasn't much for him to do with the way the ropes were tied around him…

*That poor, trapped bastard…*

And on that day, our little friend in the shadows joined us for story time with Shisui. It was a rather amusing occurrence, with how annoyed the ANBU was with us. He never really said anything, but his body language made it all the more obvious. Once story time was over, Itachi did our little friend a favor and freed him from his bindings. Almost immediately, after being freed, the ANBU glared at us…or tried to, what with his mask obscuring whatever emotion he had on his face (should he even be showing any emotion), before dashing off…and possibly continuing his job of watching over Naruto from the shadows. That was certainly the highlight of our day.

Come the next day at the Hyuuga compound, Shisui took us out for dango…right after sneaking us out of the Hyuuga compound with little Hanabi in tow. The funny thing that happened this time around was that Hanabi was *ready* to sneak out of the Hyuuga compound. She just latched onto Shisui's leg and stayed there until we were out of the compound. It was rather hilarious, seeing Shisui walk with Hanabi holding onto his leg.
"You sure are enjoying this, aren't ya, Hana-chan?" Shisui asked Hanabi as he held her up in the air.

"Shi-nii!" was all Hanabi said in response as she placed her hands on Shisui's cheeks.

Shisui laughed and looked back at Itachi. "Look at me, I'm a chick magnet!"

"Yeah, you're a real ladies' man!" This time, I totally meant what I said—sarcasm included.

"Aww, are you jealous that I'm giving my attention to Hana-chan?" Shisui grinned at me. "C'mere, I'll give you a hug!"

Sure, I'll take the hug…I like hugs. They make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside for some reason. And, coming from Shisui, it's like getting a hug from my older brother… Again, I do miss my past life, but I'm also quite fine with my new life. It's moments like these that make me appreciate what I have, instead of taking them for granted, as I would have in the past…

The New Year came and went, as did winter vacation. The passage of time was no stranger to us, at this point. Iruka-sensei continued teaching us about traps. Kunoichi classes were still a thing, which was pretty much nothing but thorough review on past subjects, with some deviations here and there whenever Suzume-sensei saw fit. And Shisui and Itachi were busy being in ANBU, with story time with Shisui being held less often as a result (damn you, Sarutobi!).

When Shino's eighth birthday came up and I started to worry—we were all turning eight this year. And Itachi was turning thirteen. In regards to his promotion to ANBU captain, it was either going to happen this year or it already has happened. I hate having to make assumptions, but that's all I can really do at this point because I'm not omniscient. And unless a deviation has occurred, then by the end of this year, Sasuke would lose his entire clan, Shisui would be dead, and Itachi would be labeled a traitor, thus forever setting off a chain of events that would basically cement Sasuke's inferiority complex, which did a lot more harm to everyone as it did harm to him.

All of that could have been avoided, if they had just talked.

Seriously, a lot of these things happen because people fail to talk. God dammit, I refuse to let this become another Frankenstein fiasco where everything happened because the fricken' doctor refused to tell anyone about the Creature—I totally need to stop being a nerd and I'm honestly amazed I can remember all of that shit. Seriously, though, I have enough experience with this shit, thanks to my freaking English classes, that I do NOT wish to live through it. It's bad enough reading about it and analyzing it, but actually living it? Like, no—bad times…

Such bad, bad times…

It really fucking sucks when you can't do anything about it. It's just like the Kyuubi attack, when I was only five months old… So many people died, and yet there was not a damn thing I could even do about it. All I could do was cry and cry… The only difference this time around, is that there is still a chance that it won't happen…but the knowledge whether or not it will happen is something I don't have. And it's just eating away at me, knowing what could happen…but not knowing whether it will happen.

I'm not omniscient…

My knowledge is so limited and it really sucks… There's a sickening feeling that lingers strongly
inside me… It's not pleasant, and it just keeps getting worse the more I think about it. My head is throbbing so badly, my body beginning to tremble…

*It hurts it hurts it hurts…*

*Hurtshurtshurtshurts!*

"Are you okay, Chōko-san?" Neji managed to snap me out of my thoughts with his sudden question.

I don't get why it is that he always seems to know whenever I'm feeling distressed. It's not that I don't appreciate it, but right now… "I'm fine."

I don't want anyone to worry about me. So I put up a façade and force a smile that looks so genuine. It's disturbingly easy to do, when you're used to hiding troubles behind a smile and laughter…

*So very, very easy…*

But unlike my past life, it's much more difficult to hide, when everyone can see through my fake smiles and lies.

"You're hiding…" Oh, fuck off, Neji—not right now!

*I'm fine—see?!*

"Ch-Chōko-chan, you're crying…" Hinata frowned, bringing my attention to the hot tears stinging my eyes.

*When did that—no, stop!*

"I just…got something in my eye!" I took off my glasses and rubbed my eyes, trying my best to make it appear as if I did have something in my eyes.

*Please don't let my lie be that terrible!*

Dammit, tears, go away!

*Stop stop stop stop!*

"Chōko-san, why must you lie?" Shino, please stop…I'm like moments away from ruining your eighth birthday—no, don't make that face!

*Stopstopstopstopstop!*

*I'm fine!*

"If you need to cry, then cry!" Sasuke loudly exclaimed.

*Fine fine fine fine!*

"I don't need to cry!" Just leave me alone!

*Finefinefinefinefine!

*FINE!*

"Is someone crying?" Shisui barged into the room, concern evident on his expression. He looked
around the room, his onyx black eyes focusing on me. "Chō-chan?"

"I'm fine!" I insisted as I placed on my glasses, even though the tears refused to stop.

"Shisui-nii!" Naruto whined. "Chōko-chan is crying and lying about it-ttebayo!"

Naruto, you two-timing jerk, I will wound you for that! "H-Hey—put me down!"

Nonononono—leave me alone!

"Aww, does Chō-chan need a hug?" Shisui said as he squeezed me gently in a tight embrace after lifting me off the floor. He tried not to look too worried as he smiled, but his eyes couldn't hide what his face could. "There, there—Shisui-nii is here for you!"

"Shisui, you stupid dork, you—" I choked back a sob, my vision continuing to blur with the amount of tears that refused to cease. My head was hurting so much, as was my chest.

"Hey, hey—I'm here, it's okay!" Shisui patted me reassuringly on the back, doing his best to calm me down. "It's okay to cry—everyone cries."

"I'm not—" I never finished my sentence. It was just too much for me. So I returned Shisui's embrace and started sobbing loudly. The thought that I could potentially lose this dork—this asshole who teases me…who's always there for us…who never fails to smile when he's with us…

Who's going to possibly die before the year comes to an end…

Why does it have to come to this?

Why?

Whywhywhywhywhywhy?!

It's not fair!

Not fair not fair not fair!

It's not fair…but when has my life ever been fair? I was reincarnated into a world where children are trained to be killers. Where old age is a life goal when you live a life where you can die at any given moment. Where the future holds a war where so many people die.

You're going to be part of that Chōko.

But I don't want to.

But you have no choice if you want to live.

Shut up shut up shut up shut up!

"Shh, shh—it's okay..." Shisui gently murmured as he rested his chin on top of my head. "I'm here...we're all here for you. It's all fine. You're safe."

Safe safe safe safe.

You are safe.

"You'll always be safe when I'm around," Shisui continued. "I'll make sure of that..."
"Shisui—please don't die!" I sobbed as my hands grasped Shisui's shirt tightly, my tiny nails nearly piercing the fabric.

"Huh?" Shisui seemed rather confused about my request...but then chuckled. "Is that what you're worried about? Did you have a nightmare about me or something?"

Nightmare?

Try a potential future...

I guess there's no actual difference, then. "Uh-huh..."

"Well, don't worry!" Shisui said reassuringly. "I won't die! It will be a long time before this guy right here kicks the bucket! I can promise you that!"

"Promise..." I found myself repeating...

"Unfortunately," Itachi said dryly.

"Oi! I heard that!" Shisui snapped at Itachi. "Hey—you too, Itachi...don't die so easily."

"I won't..." Itachi sighed. "Can we please stop talking about death?"

"Only if you liven up!" Oh, that was horrible, Shisui! "Hey, you're laughing!"

Dammit, I am! "S-Shut up—heheheh..."

Why am I a sucker for bad puns? I usually groan at these, but...coming from Shisui—I just don't know...

It feels good to laugh, though...

"That's good, that's good!" Shisui happy exclaimed. "You've stopped crying! Are you feeling better now, Chō-chan?"

I sniffed again before taking off my glasses to rub my eyes. "I...think so..."

"You worry me, sometimes," Shikamaru remarked almost out of annoyance. "How troublesome..."

I turned my head to Shikamaru and stuck my tongue out at him. Chōji started laughing at this, with Kiba making a comment that a leader shouldn't make their friends worry. I immediately denied that I was leader. It was almost automatic...which was why everyone started laughing. I felt my cheeks heat up as I realized that Kiba said that on purpose in order to provoke me.

That jerk...

And yet, I couldn't help but smile. Even after these past three years that I've been denying it, these guys really do trust me... Maybe I should stop denying it, then...

Yeah...

...
I felt better after that day, now that the feeling that's been eating away at me has disappeared. Classes at the Academy, both regular and kunoichi, have kept me distracted, as did the time I spent with my friends. It also helped that I've been watching over Ino and Sakura, as well as Ami and her friends.

Ami, Fuki, and Kasumi have been picking up the pace. I've heard people talking, instructors and students alike, as well as people outside of the Academy, saying that they're at the top of their class. It really says a lot when even people outside of the Academy are talking about girls like Ami, Fuki, and Kasumi. Neither of them belongs to anyone noteworthy. They're just normal girls with dreams they wish to fulfill.

As for Ino and Sakura, Sakura was still showing a lot of progress with her medic-nin training and her friendship with Ino was as strong as ever. It definitely showed when Ino dropped by our group to glomp Sasuke. Sakura would usually show up right after the blonde-haired girl to drag her away, apologizing on Ino's behalf, in case she happened to interrupt us. Ino just laughed, telling Sakura to lighten up before blowing a kiss to Sasuke and leaving.

Sasuke didn't really appreciate Ino's affections, nor did he like the other girls who kept trying to catch his attention. When kunoichi classes brought us back to cooking, Sasuke found himself being offered homemade bento from female students. He refused them, because he was already busy eating the food from my bento box…even though he already had his own bento that his mother made him.

You little shit!

As if my long hair wasn't enough, the bento box made my situation worse. I swear I do not like Sasuke in that way! Hell no, we're practically siblings at this point! Of course, jealous little girls don’t seem to understand the concept of a boy and a girl just being friends…

It is not that difficult of a concept to understand, dammit!

Never mind the fact that my own mother from my past life couldn't get over the fact that the majority of my friends were guys. Although, she eventually stopped fussing about it, but I still knew it bothered her. At least Mama, here, doesn't really mind…come to think of it, I'm surprised that Hiashi is taking the fact that the majority of his oldest daughter's friends are male rather well. I have to give some kudos to Hiashi, for trying to be a little more open-minded.

Of course, it could be because of me…though, that does make me Hinata's only female friend, and vice versa… I'm just happy I have friends, regardless of their gender.

...

Our third year at the Academy came to an end, and with that, I couldn't help but realize…three years have already passed. Just, wow…I never thought so much could happen in such a short amount of time. It honestly felt longer than just three years… And in four years or so, we'll be graduating from the Academy.

Four...

Ahaaha, isn't there this whole association with death going on with the number? Shisui is turning sixteen this year, and four times four is sixteen…that's just cruel. Hey, irony—can you give a person a break?

Am I not enough?

I doubt it… All that aside, there was one thing I was starting to appreciate with Shisui. Ever since he joined our circle of friends, he's made it a habit to take us out and get a group photo taken of us every
few months or so—usually during or after an event. Tanabata and the summer festival are days where Shisui insists we take a group photo.

We have photos of those events as a result, but Shisui likes to keep them for himself. He always does…

On the day Chōji and I turned eight years old, a month into our fourth year at the Academy, Shisui brought a photo album with him and showed us the photographs that were inside. Each and every group photo we had ever taken was inside the album, from our very first group photo, which was during a Hanami picnic we had just a month before Chōji and I turned six, to the most recent one, which now included a two-year-old Hanabi into the mix. The photographs were very neatly organized and dated, with little comments given to each photo. It was easy to tell that Shisui put a lot of consideration and care into the photo album.

"Inside people's memories, we can live forever," Shisui said as he continued showing us the photo album. "That's why these photos exist—so that these moments can live forever with us."

"So what does it mean to actually die?" Naruto asked.

Shisui chuckled as he reached out to ruffle Naruto's hair. "To be forgotten is when one truly does die."

... ...

"You've been reading the Hokage's philosophy books again, haven't you?" Itachi suddenly remarked, earning an annoyed glare from Shisui.

"Oh, shut up, Itachi!" Shisui snapped. "I don't see you doing anything—unlike me."

"So we're basically immortal until the day someone forgets about us…" To be forgotten is worse than death, to quote a certain Burmecian Dragoon… And, to be honest, it is actually a scary thought, the more I think about it.

"Right you are, Chō-chan!" Shisui grinned. "That's why you guys have to make sure no one ever forgets about you. Even the tiniest of memories can do a lot."

Yeah…that's right.

On that day, we all learned something important from Shisui…and I doubt we'll ever forget what happened on that day. I hope Shisui's happy, knowing that he will never be forgotten…

...

...

Come next month, Itachi turned thirteen (welcome to adolescence—where puberty fucking sucks). We spent the day at the Uchiha compound dojo, training, while the adults talked amongst themselves in their usual room. Itachi continued helping Sasuke out with his Goukakyuu, while Shisui focused on Naruto. Neji and Hinata were already introducing Hanabi to some of their clan's techniques. It was quite adorable seeing little two-year-old Hanabi trying her best to mimic her older sister and cousin.

So cute~!
Chōji and I were sparring, with Kiba, Shikamaru, and Shino watching over our match. I'm no expert or anything, but my taijutsu is definitely better than Chōji's. Of course, with the Akimichi clan techniques that he knows (that I'll never know), he could probably hit much harder than I could ever hit—but he has that advantage. I just have better technique and agility.

And there's nothing wrong with that!

Seriously, though, no one likes having me as an opponent during sparring. One thing I'd like to mention is that I have finally made through a whole year without breaking a door. I figured out how to control my own strength for once. I still need to be careful, though, since emotions can get the best of me.

Despite that, I'm quite glad I've gotten past my door breaking habit. I am one step closer to escaping my Potato Girl fate!

HELL YEAH!

...

In July, four days before Kiba's eighth birthday on Tanabata, Neji turned nine. Neji finally told us when his birthday was, so on that day, Shisui took us out to an Akimichi clan restaurant to treat Neji to his favorite meal: herring soba. Hinata was willing to say a few things Neji had yet to tell any of us, so Neji was rather surprised to see that we knew what his favorite foods were.

All I know is that, after that day, I finally know why Neji always gave me his spicy food. It was because he had little to no tolerance for it. I was probably the only one in our circle of friends who liked spicy food (at least, to my extent). I have my limits, of course—but I do enjoy the nostalgia I get whenever I eat spicy food.

The days I would usually add jalapeños to my food (because my food was never spicy enough sometimes or I just wanted to add some spice to it), as my father would, with my mom warning me that I was going to "enchilar" myself. Sometimes, but not always, I ended up downing a glass of milk because I did just that. Capsaicin does that to you...

Sometimes, I get the idea of recreating the food I had in my past life, but I don't trust myself just yet to do so. Mama says my cooking is great, but she also does say that there is still more room for improvement. One of these days, I'll try making one of my favorite home-cooked meals my mother made for me...just not now. I hope I can find the right ingredients for it...

...

Three days later, Hinata and I found ourselves being dragged alongside Naruto and Sasuke, with Neji, Shisui, and Itachi nearby, by Mikoto for yukata shopping. I did not want this...nope.

NOPE NOPE NOPE NOPE!

I'm not even sure how Mikoto found out that Hinata and I outgrew our yukata, but I'm guessing Sasuke might have said something to his mother (that little shit!). And now, here I am, with Hinata, trying on many colorful yukata.

"I think the lilac-colored one looks nice...what do you think, Chōko-chan?" Mikoto asked me as we looked over the lilac-colored yukata Hinata wore. The obi was light shade of pink and the yukata had a floral print to it...it was cute.

"Love it." In fact, I want it...but Hinata got to it first.
"And Hina-chan's got herself a yukata!" Shisui always loved to make his presence known. "How about you, Chō-chan? How you doing, doll?"

"Don't start." This is the fifteenth yukata I have tried on. I swear—if this isn't the one that looks good, then I have to try on a yellow yukata with a paper fan print and a blue obi. It's not that I don't like it. I think it's nice, but...it's not for me.

Shisui keeps trying to get me in a butterfly print yukata, which I think looks cute, but Mikoto said no (why must you be picky, woman?!). Neji was the one who picked out the pale rose yukata I am currently wearing. It had a yellow obi and a sakura pattern print.

Normally, I'm against the pattern for reasons of how overused it is (you would not believe how popular it is), but this pattern was tame. It was speckled in areas instead of everywhere. I just...I like it.

Still, Neji was the one who picked it and I...don't even want to know. The image of this Hyuuga picking out a yukata for me is a little mind-boggling—why did he even do it?

...I'm guessing he's just as tired as I am because yukata—yukata everywhere. Itachi was the one who picked out Hinata's current yukata. And Sasuke and Naruto...they're currently asleep, with Sasuke being carried on Itachi's back and Naruto on Shisui's back.

Those lucky punks...

The exact moment they had gotten their yukata, they just conked out. Which was like an hour ago.

Oh my god, just let it end!

Please, Mikoto, tell me that Hinata and I are done. I am good with this yukata—Hinata looks cute. What more could you want, woman?!

"Are you sure, Chōko-chan?" Mikoto looked questioningly at me. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes!" Come on, Mikoto—don't make me cry!

"Mikoto-san, I think Chō-chan's had enough." Thank you, Shisui, for noticing. "Besides, Chō-chan and Hina-chan are adorable."

"Yes, yes, we're adorable...can someone get me some dango?" Or any food—I'm hungry.

"Shisui-nii, can we get ramen?" Oh, looks like Naruto just woke up.

Shisui chuckled and patted Naruto on the head. "Yeah, Ichiraku Ramen does sound good just about now...do you think you can handle the yukata, Mikoto-san?"

Mikoto just looked at all of us and sighed. "You can go ahead and take them—right after Chōko-chan and Hinata-chan change out of their yukata."

And I am out! If anyone needs me, I'll be in the changing room.

FREEDOM!

...
The next day, during the evening, Sasuke, Naruto, Hinata, and I were breaking in our new yukata. Shisui made sure to commemorate the event by using his brand new camera. Yeah, guess who just bought the latest model? 'Course, the latest model looks like a camera from the 1950's, but in the world of \textit{Naruto}, that's pretty advanced (as far as I know—Shisui sure knows how to fuck with us at times).

Just…don’t talk to me about how technology works here. It's either here, or it's not…like refrigerators! And toasters…and blenders…but no TV (as far as I know, \textit{we definitely} don't have one here and I haven't seen any around). Like I said, it's either here, or not and I really don't give a damn.

\textit{I don't need any more headaches.}

\textit{Flash!}

Did I mention how picture-taking-happy Shisui is with his camera? Because he's \textit{certainly} throwing the flash around, and it got even worse when the rest of our friends showed up, I mean, Shisui was just ecstatic. It's as if the guy never did this before—oh, right.

\textit{It's his first camera, Chōko!}

Moving back to Shisui being as happy as a \textit{Fatal Frame} protagonist is with the Camera Obscura loaded up with best type of film to use against an aggressive ghost in a very dark and horrifying background, he's taking picture of every little thing that catches his eye (mostly us being cute, as he puts it). It's…pretty annoying and Itachi just finished pushing the camera out of his face, seconds after Shisui took a picture of him.

"Shisui, if you do not get that contraption out of my face, I will break it!" Ooh, weasel mad, weasel \textit{mad}!

"Sorry, I'm just…happy!" Shisui had such a wide grin on his face. "I've been saving up to buy a camera for a while now, and just…give me a moment."

I know that feel. I totally know that feel, except it involves an animated movie about a boy and his huggable robot and a six-month wait, scrounging around for whatever information existed at the time involving it. Thinking of it now, I'm quite happy I got to see the movie before I died…oh god, the wait was \textit{so} worth it and just—there's one less regret I have.

\textit{I ought to write the synopsis of that movie before I forget it…}

"At least now, we can continue making more and more memories together!" Shisui was definitely going to have a lot more pictures to add into his album—dates and quirky comments included.

From Neji winning Hanabi a goldfish, to me smacking a sticker onto his forehead for being a good sport while Hinata laughed, to Sasuke and Naruto competing against each other in katanuki, Shisui had a pretty interesting run with his camera. Then Kiba and Chōji had a contest over who can eat the most takoyaki (good luck trying, Kiba—your stomach's gonna regret it!), with Shino and Shikamaru nearby, just observing the two. After taking those pictures, Shisui started showing Naruto how to use the camera.

Naruto was a fast learner and soon, he was taking pictures of Neji as he was cleaning the cotton candy off of Hinata's face. Naruto also took a picture of the winner of the eating contest, who was Chōji. Chōji smiled proudly while Kiba was slumped against a bench, groaning as he clutched his stomach. Not long after, Naruto managed to take a picture of Itachi slapping Shisui upside the head...
for making a "weasel" remark. Apparently, Shisui still finds it funny how five-year-old me told Itachi that he looked like a weasel.

To be fair, he does look like a weasel...

By the time the last event came out, the camera was nearly out of film. With his remaining amount of film, Shisui managed to take a picture of this year's Orihime and Hikoboshi, who were, amusingly enough, Yūhi Kurenai and Sarutobi Asuma.

Wow, just wow...

Dear god, those two were completely awkward—was this how these two got together? Ha, that'd be funny…unless those two lovebirds are already a couple—oh scandalous! There's one official couple in the making.

Go them.

After the play was over, Shisui managed to get a kind, random stranger with spiky, silver hair to take a picture of us. Shisui was completely out of film after that picture…and he was very happy about it.

"I can't wait to show you the album after this—especially you, Nanazuka!" Shisui laughed as Kiba scowled at him. "I hope you had a good eighth birthday today—and I hope everyone had a good Tanabata overall."

"Yeah, I can't wait for next year, dattebayo!" Naruto smiled widely, his eyes lit up with joy. "Shisui-ni, hey, hey—what did you wish for?"

"Oh, I wished for more time with my cute, little otouto," Shisui said as he ruffled Naruto's hair. "What about you, Fishcake?"

Ahh, fishcake…you'd be surprise as to what affectionate little nickname Shisui gave Naruto. Anyways, isn't naruto a fishcake in ramen or what? I dunno, I usually just associate the name with the spiky-haired blond and everyone's favorite main character in the Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi…we're almost done with that story, by the way.

One more chapter to go—Jiraiya is a real good writer, like…seriously. I'm honestly serious about looking into more of his stories—oh, right…forgot that he writes porn. Oh my god, I doubt I'll ever bring myself to read it in the same way Kakashi does—and I'm pretty sure that guy who took our pictures was just him.

What's he doing out in the open, anyways?

We all had a good walk back home, with Shisui making it his personal mission to escort each and every one of us home. The last I saw before Chōji and I disappeared home, was Shisui carrying a sleeping Naruto on his back. Naruto was going to spend the night at the Uchiha compound, according to Shisui…whether or not he was invited.

What a dork...

I wonder what we'll be doing for the summer festival...

I can't wait!
Unfortunately, for all of us, that was the last day any of us would ever see or hear from Shisui again. Despite all that had happened—all that had managed to changed—it wasn't enough…

It just wasn't enough...

A few days later after Tanabata, Shisui was found floating down the Naka River. He was missing both of his eyes, as well as a pulse.

Chōji and I didn't find out until we were at the Uchiha compound for a surprise visit instigated by our parents. Once we were told, it all made so much sense as to why Hinata was crying and why Neji was trying his hardest not to cry while Hanabi patted Hinata on the back. Why Shino was so visibly distraught, as Itachi was comforting Sasuke, who was bawling.

Chōji had been so quick to react, crying while I was trying to process the information I received. There were so many questions I wanted to ask, because somehow—just somehow—I couldn't accept what I just heard. It was around that moment that Kiba barged into the compound, asking us if the news was true about Shisui's death. His breathing was heavy, eyes wide and filled with concern.

"I-Is he?" Kiba looked at all of us as he anticipated an answer to his question. "He can't just—can he?!

"He is," Itachi finally spoke, confirming the absolute worst for Kiba. "I'm sorry…"

"Don't apologize!" Kiba wailed as tears trickled down his cheeks. "It's not your fault, it's not…"

Itachi had such a pained expression on his face when Kiba started wailing after that. It was an expression that just read, "If only you knew…”

And I knew…but I still felt nothing. So I sat down on the floor, right next to my crying brother, and started staring at a wall. Because I didn't know where else to stare—it hurt to look at everyone else.

And yet, I feel nothing when it comes to Shisui…

Shikamaru showed up sometime later. He didn't say anything—he just stared at all of us before making his way over to Chōji and me. He sat down next to us, still saying nothing—because there wasn't really much to say.

Shisui's dead…

"He's dead…” I found myself saying, feeling such a disturbing urge to laugh, because—because… the fact didn't want to set in. It just didn't want to set in, even though I just said what I was told… "He's dead…”

"Yeah…he is…” Shikamaru finally spoke.

"He's not coming back…” I couldn't stop talking. "Is he?"

"No…he's not…” Shikamaru sighed.

I laughed. "Just like Himawari…”

"Yeah…just like her…” Shikamaru's voice cracked. "They're both gone…”

"Ah…” that's all I could really say as I continued to stare at the wall.
Naruto dropped by for a visit not long after. He showed up, so blissfully unaware, smiling so widely until he saw that everyone else felt the exact opposite of what he felt.

"What's wrong?" he asked, frowning as we all looked at him. "Why is everyone so sad-ttebayo?"

Empty...

"Wait…where's Shisui-nii?" Naruto just noticed.

So very empty...

He just noticed the lacking presence of a certain Uchiha.

Emptyemptyempty...

Who was no longer alive…because he was dead.

"Dead…" I said out loud without a second thought.

Naruto froze. "What?"

"He's dead…" I feel cold...

He's dead.

As if someone had dumped a bucket of ice-cold water on me.

He's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead.

Why am I not crying?

Deaddeaddeaddeaddeaddead...

Why?

He's dead.

"He's dead…" Why is it so easy to say something like that and yet, feel nothing?

"Hey—this isn't funny-ttebayo!" Naruto furrowed his brow. "St-Stop messing around and just tell me where he is!"

"Naruto…" Itachi called out to the blond.

"Where's Shisui-nii?!" Naruto looked anxiously at Itachi.

Itachi grimaced. "He's…dead."

The look of complete disbelief on Naruto's face was heartbreaking. "Dead…? N-No, Shisui-nii can't be dead—he said he wouldn't die-ttebayo! He told Chōko-chan that! He said so in front of all of us, dattebayo."

I felt myself cringe when I recalled the events that had occurred on Shino's eighth birthday. Shisui did say he wouldn't die…but look what happened here. Apparently, it was suicide…Neji wasn't exactly the most tactful person in the world when emotionally hurt. Neji was, in fact, that type of person.
"Seriously—stop messing around!" Naruto yelled, his eyes beginning to glisten with unshed tears. "It's not funny, dattebayo!"

"I apologize, but..." Itachi looked so pained, as if someone had punched him in the gut. "Shisui—he...he couldn't keep his promise."

"Is that so...?" A fake smile forced its way onto Naruto's face as he choked back a sob. "Ah...so he's dead...Why...? Why is he dead?"

No answer...

"Why did he have to die-ttebayo?" Naruto wanted an answer, as he choked back another sob.

I could see that Itachi was struggling to find an explanation. Neji managed to keep quiet, despite his early tactless demeanor. It was not easy telling Naruto that Shisui had been the one to take his life. And knowing that Itachi was involved...it must really hurt him to see Naruto struggling with the loss of Shisui.

I'm guessing Itachi could have normally acted calmly in canon, but here, where Naruto is around, very much deeply devastated by Shisui's death...Itachi had little to no chance of hiding his true emotions. So when Itachi stood up and walked over to Naruto, wrapping his arms around the small blond in an embrace, I could hear how shaky his voice was as he told Naruto, "Shisui told me...to protect you, now that he's gone."

"H-He really is dead, dattebayo?" Naruto knew for a fact that Shisui would never let anyone take his place unless something happened...and this was just that.

"I am sorry." Itachi's voice cracked.

Naruto started crying after that, his sobs feeling like a huge punch to my gut. Sasuke cried harder, as did Hinata, Kiba, and Chōji. Neji couldn't hold back his emotions and started crying as well. Hanabi had no idea what was going on, but being a child around people who were crying, it wasn't a surprise that she did the same. Shino managed to keep his composure, but I could see the tears that were trailing down his cheeks. Shikamaru was surprisingly calm, even though he was like Shino, tears and all.

"It's okay," Shikamaru tried to reassure me. "You don't have to hold it in."

"What do you mean...?" Shikamaru, why are you patting me on the head?

"You're being like the old Neji-san," Shikamaru explained, sounding so concerned. "Stop holding it in, like you did last time."

"I'm not..." I just have no idea how to react. I mean, I knew this was going to happen...and there's so much more that's going to happen because of this incident. I can't stop anything...this is out of my reach. And worst of all...I made Shisui make a promise he couldn't keep. "I'm...not..."

My chest is hurting. The more I think about the fact that Shisui is dead, the more I realize he will never be able to talk again. Nor will anyone ever be able to hear that voice again—that voice that was so full of life. He will never be able to laugh again—or tease any one of us, like he usually did. He will never be able to read the last chapter of the book he got Naruto for his seventh birthday...

Shisui's wish will never come true...because he ran out of time before he could spend any more of it with Naruto. He ran out of time...
"Because he's gone."

My fingers are tingling and my mouth is dry. It feels as if there is something stuck in my throat. And my eyes...they're burning. My vision is blurring because of the tears welding up in my eyes. I took off my glasses and tried to wipe away the tears, but they wouldn't stop.

"It's okay to cry." Shikamaru, you're crying, too. "Really, it's okay to cry, Chōko—you can cry."

I don't know why, but after hearing Shikamaru say that...I started crying. I cried loud and hard, because the one person we grew attached to—the same one who wormed his way into our hearts—is dead.

He's dead...and nothing will ever change that.

... 

... 

Itachi tried reading the last chapter of the Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi to us, as means of giving us some sort of closure. He had a difficult time doing so, however, because two pages into the final chapter, we had started crying.


Naruto kept repeating himself as he continued to sob. We found ourselves agreeing with Naruto, because it felt so wrong to listen to someone else, other than Shisui, read that book. Itachi looked hurt and while he understood, he said that Shisui would have wanted him to read the last chapter...

"Now that he's gone..." Itachi frowned. "I apologize, but...I have to do this..."

So he persevered and managed to finish the last chapter. It was such an empty feeling, seeing that book closed for one last time, now that the story was over. It was still wrong that it wasn't Shisui who had finished reading the story...

"I'm sorry..." Itachi told us as tears splashed down onto the cover of the book he held in his hands. "I'm so sorry..."

For the first time in two weeks, Itachi started crying as he continued to apologize to us. It was weird—seeing Itachi, of all people, crying. Of course, knowing his situation, he had every reason to cry, as well as every reason to apologize. After all, I'm pretty sure that's Shisui's left eye in his left eye socket. So much had happened during Shisui's final moments and Itachi knew, but couldn't tell anyone...

It was difficult knowing the truth...just as difficult as it was to acknowledge the loss of a good friend.

"I'm so sorry..." Itachi continued to repeat himself. "I'm so, so sorry..."

...

...

We went through Shisui's belongings a few days later, once Naruto decided we had all cried enough. Even though Shisui was gone, his stuff wasn't—so here we are, looking through what's left over of the life he once lived. As we were looking through his stuff, we came across Shisui's photo album.

Naruto was quick to snatch the album out of my hands when I had found it. Almost immediately, we
circled around Naruto as he opened the album. Looking through the pictures Shisui had so neatly organized and dated, alongside adding a quirky little comment…it was just so strange, knowing the guy is dead.

"I still can't believe it…" I found myself saying, trying my best to ignore the pang in my chest.

Hinata nodded her head. "Y-Yeah…"

"Shisui-nii can't be dead-ttebayo!" Naruto insisted with a somewhat forced smile. "He said so himself—to be forgotten is when one truly does die, dattebayo!"

Oh, that's right…he did say that.

"He isn't exactly the most forgettable person around…” Chōji gave a wistful smile.

Shikamaru sighed. "How troublesome."

"I still miss him calling me, Nanazuka…” Kiba frowned.

"It was easy to grow fond of the attention he had given all of us…” Shino remarked.

"As annoying as he was, it's never going to be the same without Shisui-san." Aww, Neji, c'mere! "Ch-Chōko-san—what are you doing?!"

"You need a hug!" Since Shisui isn't here anymore, I'm taking over hugs. "I mean, Shisui isn't here anymore to do it…"

Neji stared at me for a moment and sighed as he allowed me hug him. "Don't get used to it…"

Smack!

"I should have expected that…" Neji said, moments after I finished smacking a sticker onto his forehead. Just because I'm mourning doesn't mean I'm neglecting my sticker job…speaking of which!

Smack!

"Ow!" Sorry, Kiba, didn't mean to do it that hard.

"If you want, Naruto, you can keep the album," Itachi finally spoke. "Shisui left most of his possessions to you."

"Really-ttebayo?!" Naruto was grinning widely. "Awesome!"

It was nice seeing Naruto smiling again…in fact, I was glad that we were all smiling. We really needed this moment…

\[It \textit{still} \text{ hurts...but not as badly.\]
"I read somewhere that if you want to keep a soul in this world, then you plant a tree over their grave!" Naruto must have done a lot of reading after getting the plant from our little friend in the shadows. "The tree then absorbs the soul and keeps it in this world. This way, Shisui HAS to stay here!"

For that reason alone, Naruto was trying to find out if it was possible to mix Shisui's ashes with soil and use that to grow a tree. Ino actually said it was possible and that Naruto's idea wasn't the first one she and her family had heard. In fact, they have a side business doing that.

"Of course, since Sasuke-kun is your friend, I'll try to see if I can break you guys a deal!" Ino continued. "Just be patient, okay? Now I gotta go—Sakura is probably looking for me."

"Ino!" That was Sakura. "Are you bugging Sasuke again?!"

Ino giggled and ran off. "Not this time!"

It's nice seeing those two get along…

Especially with all that has happened…

…

When Naruto introduced the idea to Itachi, he wasn't against it. In fact, he suggested the type of tree to plant for Shisui.

"He always liked magnolias," Itachi remarked almost wistfully. "Now I will try to help, but I cannot promise that we will be able to go through with it. The Uchiha clan might not be as accepting to it."

And they weren't. Naruto was crushed when Itachi told him that Fugaku shot down the idea. We were all crushed…I'm pretty sure we were really taken with the idea of Shisui becoming a tree. And Ino just finished getting us the seeds for the tree…

I wonder if we can sneak out Shisui's ashes on Sasuke's eighth birthday…

"We can try!" Sasuke was down with it.

And come Sasuke's eighth birthday, we utterly failed at trying to sneak out the urn carrying Shisui's ashes. We are the worst grave robbers in existence.

I'm so sorry, Shisui! We have failed you!

"It's not my fault Shikamaru can't make a convincing bird noise," Sasuke muttered as he gave Shikamaru a light shove.

"Tweet," Shikamaru deadpanned, his expression matching his tone.

"He did say he wouldn't do a good job at it." Chōji sighed.

I face palmed. "He could have just stayed silent instead of ruining it after Kiba made the dog noise and I did the cat noise…"

"Y-You were really good at that, by the way." Thank you, Hinata, and thank you for getting Neji to help you out with watch duty. I still can't believe those two actually went through with the plan and used their Byakugan for it. So much for the prim and proper Hyuuga…

We are such bad influences!
"What are we gonna do now?" Kiba asked as he rubbed the back of his head. "We weren't able to get Shisui outta there."

"We could always plan for next time," Shino suggested. "We ought to consider the possibilities and make sure Shikamaru-kun does something other than terrible bird imitations."

…

"Did you just make a joke?!" Oh my god, I think Shino just did!

"At least something came out of this, dattebayo!" Nice to see you being optimistic, Naruto. "We just gotta try harder next time!"

Itachi just looked at all of us and sighed. "I'll try and find a day that will work…right after our punishment is over."

Did I mention that we all got grounded? Yes, even Naruto, who is an orphan—of course, at this point, he might as well be part of the Uchiha clan.

"We're all grounded and it's all your fault, Shikamaru!" You just had to botch that bird noise!

"I said I was sorry." And Shikamaru did. "Look, it's only for a week. We'll be out by the time the summer festival comes by. And we're not in trouble until we head back home. At least your mother won't yell at you."

Oh, forgot about Yoshino…yeah…I feel bad for you, now, Shikamaru.

"In the meantime, let's go tell Shisui we're coming back for him later!" I mean, we might as well since we're at the Uchiha compound and their graveyard is nearby…let's just try and put our thoughts away from the fact that we are grounded.

"Let's go get some senbei first!" Sasuke suggested. "Teyaki and Uruchi say since it's my birthday, me and you guys can get free senbei!"

I'm not exactly a fan of senbei (I'll still eat it), but free food is free food. And right after we dropped by Uchiha Senbei to pick up our free senbei from Teyaki and Uruchi, who are quite very lovely people, we paid Shisui's grave a visit. It's still weird knowing that this lively, optimistic teenage boy was dead…but the memories we had of him were still very much alive.

He will never be forgotten…

…

After that day, we were all grounded for a week and it was the worst week ever. Ageha was going on and on about how wrong it was to try and steal Shisui's ashes and just…ugh. Wanna know what was even worst? It was the first week of summer vacation and just…having so much time, but not being allowed outside—it's the worst! It's even worse when you have ADHD, because of all this pent up energy that demanded to be released!

Let me out, dammit!

I think I read through the medical book at least twice during the week…I was freaking bored! Chōji was just as bored and even started reading along when I was reading through the book a second time. I'm still no expert with all things medical, but I at least have an idea of the vital points on the human body. The knowledge still needs some work…
Once our week of punishment was over, the first thing I did during our reunion was hug Hinata. Chōji and Shikamaru were catching up and Hanabi was calling out to Naruto, who had lifted her off the ground.

"I missed you so much!" I think I might have abandonment issues in some way or form…

"I m-missed you too, Chōko-chan!" Hinata said as she returned the hug.

"It's only been a week." Neji, don't kill the mood. "You're going to have to get used to it when you become Genin."

"He's right, you know," Itachi agreed, when I wish he didn't.

"I don't want to know that now!" God dammit, I just want to have some quality friendship time, not dreary contemplations about the future! I already go through enough of that shit! Do you have any idea how difficult it is anticipating the Uchiha Clan Massacre?! I have been having nightmares for three days straight! I am exhausted…

So much death...

I never realized how much my mental health benefited from just seeing Sasuke and Itachi, and knowing that the Uchiha clan has lived to see another day—speaking of which…

"Can I hug you, Itachi-san?" I need to confirm that you are still here, and not labeled a traitor.

"You may…ah!" Itachi gasped when I wrapped my arms around his waist in a near spine-cracking hug. "Can't…breathe…"

"Oops!" I was quick to release Itachi. "Sorry…I just…sorry…"

"I-It's fine…" Itachi said as he rubbed at his back. "Just…be gentle next time…"

"I will…" Oh gosh, that was embarrassing!

"So what is it that you suppose we do now?" Shino asked.

"Let's go get some ramen!" Naruto exclaimed. "I haven't had any in the past week I've been living with you guys…"

"How did you like living with us, Naruto?" Sasuke asked Naruto.

Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "It was nice…even though we were being punished…Still, it was nice living with people."

"You're welcome to stay with us anytime you'd like," Itachi said. "Okaa-san told me to tell you that."

"Neat!" Naruto exclaimed. "So can we go get some ramen?"

Kiba nodded his head. "Ramen sounds nice!"

And so we had ramen at Ichiraku Ramen. Teuchi and Ayame were very happy to see us, and we were just happy to get some ramen. It was good to be together again…

…

…
On the night of the summer festival, Naruto decided to do what Shisui did on Tanabata and that was take pictures of everyone. Naruto was trying his best to preserve Shisui’s memory, but was having a difficult time, considering the size and weight of the camera. When Itachi saw that Naruto was having issues, he took over as photographer. And while Itachi wasn’t as picture-taking-happy as Shisui, Itachi wasn't going easy on the pictures either.

*Flash! Flash! Flash!* 

Since I'm on the subject about Itachi, there was something off about him as of lately. Sometimes, he looks so tired and stressed…but then the next moment, he seems quite fine. It's as if he's trying to hide something, which isn't out of the ordinary, considering what he keeps under wraps when it comes to Shisui (something he can never really tell us).

Tonight, he seems to be trying his best to enjoy every little moment with us. At first, I put it down as Itachi trying to cope without Shisui being around… We're all coping differently, after all.

*Except that wasn't the case…*

It all happened after we had decided to leave early to pay Shisui's grave a visit before going to the Hyuuga compound to watch the fireworks. It was such a simple task—one that was most likely going to be added to our routine of activities from this point on, with how drastically our life has changed after Shisui's death. That should have been the case…

*It should have.*

We were making our way through the Uchiha district, the eerie silence catching our attention almost immediately. We all thought nothing much about it…when we probably should have.

*Such terrifying silence…*

It was only after Sasuke opened the door to his house that I found out why Itachi had been acting so differently. It happened all so suddenly, as if it was any other day. Sasuke was midway through greeting his mother and father, before stopping so suddenly. His body stiffened, his voice completely lost to him as he stared out, while the rest of us stood behind him.

"What's wrong-ttebayo?" Naruto asked Sasuke as he opened the other half of the door to see what it was that Sasuke was looking at. What we saw then, was a sight that will forever be engraved deep within our memories—that will forever haunt us, for the rest of our lives.

The coppery metallic scent of blood was strong in the air. It was strange that we only just noticed it now, as we stared at the lifeless bodies of Uchiha Fugaku and Mikoto that were across from us. Blood pooled out from under their bodies, their onyx black eyes so completely devoid of life.

*Emptyemptyemptyemptyempty.*

I have no idea how long we were staring, but pretty soon, Sasuke let out a bloodcurdling scream. He screamed and he screamed. He kept screaming, until the rest of us began to react, now that we had realized what it is that we were looking at.

Neji and Hinata were quick to shield Hanabi's eyes. Neji wasn't screaming, but he was very well disturbed and looked rather nauseous. Hinata was crying and Shino had lost all sense of feeling in his legs. He felt flat on his butt, his gaze still directed at Mikoto and Fugaku's bodies. Shikamaru was horrified, and whatever food Chōji and I ate was immediately emptied out of our stomachs.

The acidic burn in the pit of my stomach refused to go away, as I continued to heave.
Kiba was already having a hard time, what with his sensitive nose. He did say something about it smelling weird, but he wasn't so used to recognizing the scent of fresh blood…until now. And what a horrifying way to learn what fresh blood smells like…

Naruto was hyperventilating, just mere seconds away from going into a full-blown panic attack. Itachi was trying his best to calm us all down, but he was having a hard enough time as is. He was so confused—so very confused and terrified.

Naruto already lost Shisui, and now…he lost everyone else. He and Sasuke…and, Itachi, too—wait…if Itachi was right there with us, then who…

That was the last thought I ever had before my vision went black. When I woke up, I was in the children's ward at the hospital. I was scared, because I was alone and confused…

What happened?

But then Hinata entered my room. She motioned at me to stay quiet, holding her index finger to her lips, before gesturing at me to follow her…and I did. As we moved around the hallway, sneaking past people, we could hear them talking. Talking about what happened last night…and how the Uchiha clan was massacred.

And that Itachi and Sasuke were the only known survivors.

Chapter End Notes

4-18-16 Aaaaaay, have some more edits that made this chapter even hella longer than it preciously was, holy shit! Just…things happened and…yeah, I guess this is it for now, when it comes to edits. Also, friendly reminder that this story now has a tvtropes page, so feel free to contribute!

Remember how I said that I would be busy playing Pokémon Omega Ruby (have yet to start Alpha Sapphire, but I have started Persona Q, so watch out, Façade readers)? Yeah, that actually happened and I only recently just finished beating the game a few days ago. By the way, the music is quite lovely and I certainly had a good time with my team of Pokémon. Ahem, anyways, I'm currently staying at my older sister's home, helping her out because I need a job and she's paying me, so ya.

That being said, let me tell you about this chapter… The Uchiha Clan Massacre…it happened, but…Itachi didn't do it. He and Sasuke are the only survivors, so something changed immensely. Also, reason why Chōko doesn't contemplate too much on the future is because it gets to her emotionally, as shown with how much she started to worry about Shisui, the Uchiha Clan Massacre, and the events it would set off. This is why she lives in the moment, because when she starts realizing what could happen…she gets worked up. She's not good at hiding her emotions either once the tears start coming.

The title of this chapter came from the translation of Shisui's name. Shisui's name has two interpretable meanings. Combining the words Shi (死, Death) and Sui (水,Water), Shisui would mean "death water", which is a reference to his death by drowning. "Shisui" (止水) alone means "still water" or "stagnant water". By the way, with the way Shisui's name is…holy crap, this character was just…yeah. Also, this is chapter 16, so THERE'S an unintentional thing that happened. This chapter is nothing but death.
Bluh…sorry for the whiplash in the mood.

Moving on, Naruto gets to know the story of the Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi. All thanks to Shisui…who is gone, and I feel horrible because I really grew attached to this dork. Also, kudos to ChibiFoxAI, for the suggestion of using Shisui's ashes to grow a tree because she's the one who showed me how someone's ashes could be used to grow a tree…and so the joke about the soul tree came to be because of it. But seriously, I think it's awesome that, aside from being able to make your ashes into a jewel, they could also be used to grow a tree. The type of magnolia that was picked for Shisui is a magnolia × soulangeana or a saucer magnolia.

Anyways, that is it for now, so I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! I'm really happy how this chapter turned out, and it's even long! So until next time, everyone!
Out of everything that has happened, I was mostly shocked to hear that Itachi was still in the village. He wasn't labeled a traitor, but he was currently being questioned. Even though Itachi had the most solid alibi ever, with pictures to prove it, thanks to a certain deceased Uchiha's camera (Shisui, you beautiful bastard!), Itachi was still suspected in taking part in the Uchiha Clan Massacre.

"M-Mikoto-san and F-Fugaku-san…" Hinata frowned.

Yeah…they're gone…

"Where are we going?" That's what I want to know.

"Shh…k-keep your v-voice down…" Hinata was definitely nervous. "N-Naruto-kun and the others a-are looking for S-Sasuke-kun's room…"

"How long ago did you wake up?" I'm assuming Hinata and everyone else were also knocked out. I have a feeling Itachi had been the one to knock us out… Either him, or the ANBU who probably arrived upon receiving word from our little friend in the shadows that something was wrong. He's still following Naruto, by the way…so he most likely saw the mess at the Uchiha compound.

Oh god, the memory is still fresh in my head!

"T-Ten minutes ago," Hinata replied. "K-Kiba-kun woke me up…and then I found y-you."

"Thanks for finding me, by the way…" I appreciate it.

"Y-You're welcome!" Hinata smiled.

"And what are you two doing out of your rooms?" Hinata and I nearly shrieked upon being asked that question…nearly. When we saw that it was Sakura who was talking to us, we immediately calmed down. Sakura had her hands on her hips as she looked sternly at us. "You two are supposed to be resting in your rooms."

"S-Sorry, S-Sakura-chan…" Hinata stuttered. "W-We were j-just looking for—"

"Sasuke, right?" Sakura interrupted Hinata. Upon seeing us both nod in response, Sakura sighed and shook her head. "Follow me…I'll lead you to the others."

...Others?

Huh, looks like Hinata and I aren't the only ones who Sakura has encountered.

…

…

"Just try not to make too much noise, or the nurses will find you." That was what Sakura told us, moments after taking us to Sasuke's room. She left shortly afterwards, most likely returning to her post. I've heard she's become a medic-nin's assistant already. For an eight-year-old girl with at least two years of medic-nin training, that is quite the accomplishment. I honestly feel so proud for Sakura.
I wonder how Ino feels—oh my god, Chōko, focus! Sasuke is in the room with everyone else, still likely devastated with the loss of his clan. The least you can do is try to comfort him, instead of being proud of Haruno Sakura and her medic-nin progress!

You can do that later...

"Hinata, open the door." I'm kinda afraid to do it myself…

"U-Uh, I was h-hoping you'd do that…" Oh no, Hinata, please don't make me do it!

After two minutes of staring at each other, I sighed in defeat and opened the door. Hinata just couldn't do it and I just couldn't make her do it… I am a big pushover when it comes to Hinata—I just am.

When I had opened the door, Hinata and I were greeted to the sight of our friends circling around Sasuke as he tried to hide himself underneath the covers of his bed. Naruto was doing his best to coax Sasuke to come out, but he refused. It was easy to tell that Sasuke was crying, considering his constant sniffing and poor attempts at choking back sobs. After closing the door behind us, Hinata and I joined our friends and Naruto continued with his attempts.

"Sasuke, we're worried about you-ttebayo." Naruto furrowed his brow. "We just want to see if you're okay—"

At that moment, Sasuke pulled the covers off of himself and yelled directly at Naruto, "E-Everyone is gone! There's no one left, but me and Nii-san—what makes you think I'm okay?!"

Naruto flinched at how close Sasuke was to his face and at how loud he had been. Despite this, Naruto didn't falter. He kept his ground and looked Sasuke directly in the eye. "Th-Then stop trying to do everything yourself, dattebayo! You are not alone, dumbass! You have friends—and we're all here for you, dattebayo!"

Sasuke scowled at Naruto, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Do you have any idea how it feels to lose everything?!"

"Yes!" Naruto snapped. "I do—in fact, we all do-ttebayo!"

"Have you not realized that all the time we spent together has also strengthened our bonds with each and every one of our families?" Shino questioned Sasuke. His tone was firm and somewhat stern, catching quite a lot of us by surprise. Shino wasn't the type to speak out like this…but here he is, doing so anyways because it probably feels right to do so. "We might not be on the same wavelength as you and Itachi-san, but we still feel the pain and loss from the tragedy that had occurred last night."

"Wh-Wha?" Sasuke was rendered speechless…as was everyone else.

What Shino had said struck a chord within everyone. Even though we cannot fathom how it must feel to be Itachi and Sasuke, we were still very much affected by the Uchiha Clan Massacre. It's hard to forget the many memories that we made over the years, after all…

"It's the same when Hinata-sama's mother died and when Shisui-san was found dead…" Neji decided to add to Shino's statement.

Chōji nodded. "It's just as Shino said."
"Y-You're not the only one who f-feels it…" Hinata remarked.

"And stop trying to hide!" Shikamaru looked sternly at Sasuke. "It's troublesome enough when Neji-san used to do it, and even more so when Chōko does it—don't start, too."

"Please…you're not alone." Kiba frowned. "You have us…right, leader?"

All attention immediately turned to me. Thanks a lot, Kiba, for putting me in the spotlight. I really appreciate it—now's not the time for sarcasm. I need to be serious for once.

"Sasuke, what happened last night is something we'll never be able to forget." I'm stating the obvious, but honestly… We'll all probably be having nightmares about it for the rest of our lives. "We all saw what you saw and—dammit, if you need to cry, then cry! Please…just don't push us away."

Not when you need us…

Not when we need you.

"Sa-ke not 'lone," Hanabi finally spoke. She had been in the room this entire time, but she was quiet. Even Hanabi, as young as she is, was able to tell something was wrong based on the current atmosphere. Her eyes might have never seen Fugaku and Mikoto's bloody corpses, but she was still there when we were all screaming and crying. She was there, caught up in the godawful atmosphere full of anguish and horror. She didn't see a goddamn thing, but she definitely felt something from it…and I doubt she'll ever forget that night. "Sa-su-ke…not alone."

Sasuke stared at Hanabi. That was the first time she had ever been able to say his entire name, usually calling him "Sa-ke", which sounded exactly like sake (Shisui used to tease Sasuke about it, whenever Hanabi said his name…). And for a two-year-old girl, Hanabi was very perceptive than she let on, as we have only just found out.

When Naruto climbed onto Sasuke's bed to give the Uchiha a hug, Sasuke didn't push him away. He didn't say anything and just stared out, his eyes soon overflowing with tears. A minute passed before Sasuke managed to utter a weak and broken, "Thank you."

And then he broke down into tears.

…

…

When Itachi finally returned from his questioning to pick Sasuke and the rest of us up from the hospital, I couldn't help but wonder what was going through his head when he laid witness to the group of children running away from a couple of nurses. I know he saw, because I yelled out, "Hi Itachi, bye Itachi!" as I passed him.

There was definitely something inappropriate for a bunch of kids to be running around the hospital. Especially if those kids are us, who are still recovering from last night's events. We weren't exactly crying anymore—in fact, we were laughing, because the nurses were just too slow.

Why were we running, you ask? Well, the nurses had tried separating us from each other when it came to their attention that we were no longer in our rooms. But then it quickly came to our attention that we wanted to stay together, so we just got the fuck out of there.

It sounds simple enough, but the nurses weren't exactly so happy with our inability to comply, so
they just… started running after us. And so shenanigans ensued, because despite how organized the hospital was, there were still a lot of opening for us kids to get through…

Shikamaru was surprisingly proactive for once, making use of his clan's technique, the Kagemane no Jutsu (AKA, the Shadow Imitation Technique). It's not exactly the best technique to use as the Kagemane is very tiring on the user, but Shikamaru didn't give a damn as he used it to slow down any nearby nurses to allow us some more time to escape when it was clear that we were about to be cornered. I showed my thanks to the baby sloth by carrying him out of there when his legs gave out. There was just something so hilarious about how easily I can hold up Shikamaru over my head. Shikamaru wasn't exactly amused, but he wasn't complaining because hey, he didn't have to run. Even so, that still didn't stop him from muttering, "How troublesome."

*How troublesome, indeed…*

After a couple more wacky hospital shenanigans, Itachi finally caught up to us and brought an end to our mayhem. The look of confusion on his face as we used him as a shield to distance us from the angry nurses who stood across from him was priceless. I wondered what was going on through his head, again, as the nurses bitched out at him for all the trouble we caused.

By the end of the afternoon, as we followed Itachi out of the hospital, the older Uchiha looked exhausted. I felt bad for him, but at the same time, I couldn't help but find the situation funny (the whole hospital scenario with the nurses, I mean). And when I started laughing, everyone started laughing as well. Itachi just sighed, but if you looked closely, you could tell that he was smirking. Deep down, despite all the hell the nurses gave him, he found our antics quite amusing.

I know we shouldn't be laughing after what happened last night, but we really needed this moment. Because as we made our way through town, people were whispering as we passed. We couldn't go three minutes without hearing mentions of, "the last Uchiha" and the "Uchiha Clan Massacre". People were mourning, sympathizing, and gossiping about the massacre. And while they had good intentions (or not—you honestly never know with this fucking village), last night's events were the last thing we wanted on our mind.

…

When Itachi tried to drop Chōji and me off at the Akimichi compound, we all hesitated to say goodbye. Like, there was a pause when we tried to say the word. And when Chōji and I tried leaving, Sasuke grabbed us by the arms and told us not to leave.

"Please…don't leave me…" We…weren't in any state to leave each other.

Our families were quite understanding of us when we told them that we would be staying at Naruto's place until further notice. Hiashi was against it at first…but when he tried taking Hanabi away from Sasuke, she started crying. At the sight of how close we were to Itachi and Sasuke, Hiashi sighed and made an exception.

And so, for the next three weeks, we were all living at Naruto's apartment. If we went out, we went out together. We just couldn't bear to be apart from each other. Itachi tried to hide it, but I could tell he didn't want any of us out of his sight. Often, he did a headcount as if to reassure himself that yes, we were all there with him.

Hinata and I did the cooking… because like hell we were trusting any of the guys, aside from Itachi (who is a surprisingly good cook), with the portable stove. By the by, the most Naruto can even do was heat up water using the electric kettle he owned. While on the topic of Naruto, Hinata and I took
turns trying to sneak vegetables into his food. We found out that Naruto is the type of person to not pay any attention to what he is eating when thoroughly distracted… Which is good, because I don't like force-feeding Naruto vegetables, as amusing as it was, because seeing Naruto practically hiss at a carrot is entertaining as hell.

And on the fifth day, Hinata and I nearly had a heart attack when we saw Itachi, clad in nothing but a towel, walking into the women's side of the bathhouse to personally drag Naruto back to the men's side. Because Naruto thought it would be funny to sneak into the women's side and I'm just going to say it now… the Oiroke no Jutsu is in the making. I saw the pigtails and Naruto passing as a convincing little blonde girl.

When the hell did he find the time for that?!

Shisui would be proud of Naruto for getting Itachi to do something so bold…and I'm pretty sure all the ladies (mostly girls in their early to late teens) appreciated the view that was Uchiha Itachi clad in nothing but a towel. Yes, he's only thirteen, but Itachi was tall for his age and was riding through puberty on a golden chariot (that lucky asshole!). Also, niiice stomach…and legs (that I wish I had, but I'm only eight, so it'll be a long time before that development even happens—should it happen)… okay, so I appreciated the view as well, so what?!

I can't help it if Itachi is aesthetically attractive… Well, that sounded fucking creepy. It's a good thing I don't have a crush on the guy, or else that would've been even more awkward. In all my nineteen years in my past life, I have managed to develop one crush and one crush only on an actual person (before then, it was on fictional character N Harmonia from Pokémon Black and White— I'm still not over his pretty hair, by the way) and that was during my senior year of high school. It was on a friend of mine who was not looking into getting in a relationship anytime soon with anyone. It was honestly a relief when nothing much changed after I confessed to her. Though, I could've done without the mixed signals I felt afterwards. Really, it was just my luck that I developed a crush on a flirty bisexual jokester who no one could tell when she was being serious or not.

I wonder how everyone else is doing now...

I should probably abandon that train of thought before I start thinking about the friends I've left behind. Dwelling on the past is the last thing I should do, especially now, when I'm still recovering from the trauma I got when I saw Fugaku and Mikoto's bloody corpses. Let me tell you about nightmares— THEY ARE HORRIBLE WHEN THEY ARE ABOUT THINGS YOU'VE ACTUALLY WITNESSED.

It feels like I'm stating the obvious, but really, it's just so bad. I feel like throwing up each time I wake up with my stomach still twisting and turning so unpleasantly. My body trembles so violently and my breaths come out hitched. My head feels lightheaded and the tears—they just won't stop. It's really only a matter of seconds before I wake everyone else up with my loud sobs.

I almost welcome sleep paralysis at this point… then I had the luck of experiencing just that, and it was worse. It was so much worse… None of us got any sleep that night, because I just couldn't stop crying.

I'm not the only who wakes up crying in the middle of the night. It has happened to everyone else at least once, with the exception of Itachi, who makes the excuse of getting a glass of water when he's really going to the bathroom to recover from his nightmare. It's a viable excuse that would have worked on me…had he not used it so consistently over the week.

"Chōko-san, what are you doing?" Can't you see, Itachi? I am hugging you.
"You had a nightmare…” This is the seventh time this week this has happened. I thought we made it clear that we wouldn’t be hiding anything from each other concerning the incident. That we would be supporting of each other as we tried to cope with the trauma. It's why we're sleeping together in the same bed, after all… "Accept the hug or I'll wake everyone else."

"Hn…” was all Itachi said, because I doubt he wants to wake any of us up, considering we're sleeping rather soundly today…well, I was, until weasel accidentally woke me up when he left the bed.

_Th-Thump th-thump! Th-Thump, th-thump!_

It's amazing how fast the human heart could beat. It's almost scary, because it sounds like Itachi's heart could burst at any second. It takes a while for his heartbeat to slow down, but eventually, Itachi manages to calm down. He breathes out and then places a hand on top of my head.

"Thank you," he tells me, before poking me in the forehead. "Now go back to sleep."

I think the nightmares began to lessen near the end of our second week together. During said week, Sasuke and Naruto bought Hinata and me a make-up kit that we could use for practice…and we did use it…and so did Kiba, Naruto, Sasuke, Chōji, and Shikamaru. I swear, we were having so much fun with that make-up kit—it's ridiculous. And Hanabi liked eating the lipstick…Shino said it was a phase. Neji hoped it was.

And after the whole "Nejiko" incident (in which make-up, Neji, and Shisui's camera were involved), Neji stayed particularly quiet when Itachi started commenting on the sudden attention boys have been giving him. Apparently, Itachi hadn't realized that Hinata and I had applied make-up onto his face while he was sleeping. And it was only until a fourteen-year-old boy tried asking Itachi out on a date that he found out about the make-up on his face.

Needless to say, Hinata and I had our foreheads poked _hard_…but we all had a good laugh out of it. And for the first time in three years, Neji was the one smirking at Itachi.

On the third and final week, Itachi and Sasuke were given access to the Uchiha compound. Everything had been cleaned up since the day of the massacre, but trying to take one step into the place was _extremely_ difficult. Why were we even trying to get into the Uchiha compound when it's the last thing any of us should do, what with the psychological trauma we have? Shisui's ashes… with no one else around to tell us we couldn't, we were going to use his ashes to grow the tree we had picked out for him. That is, if we could actually _get_ to his ashes.

Day one consisted of Naruto having a panic attack after Sasuke opened the door to his house. Right after that, Sasuke took a few steps back and then threw up on the ground. Itachi tried going into the house by himself, but we stopped him upon noticing how much his body was shaking as he neared the entrance. Itachi might have been an ANBU captain, but he still is only _thirteen_. Shinobi life or not, human is human and like _hell_ we were going to let Itachi force himself to enter a place we now associate with a traumatic event…not by himself at least.

Of course, I doubt any of us were ready on day one to enter, so we left the Uchiha compound and ate ramen at Ichiraku Ramen.

Day two consisted of us taking a few steps into the house before Hanabi started crying and whatever nerve we had was lost in the moment as we left the house to try and calm her down. We are not giving up, by the way. Shisui, we're coming for you!

_**Today is just not that day**…_
On day three, we spent an afternoon just sitting around the entrance of Itachi and Sasuke's home. We managed to make it in and we were at least capable of staying longer than ten minutes. And come the next day, we were able to walk around the area. Though, when we neared the location where Fugaku and Mikoto's bloody corpses once laid…we immediately left.

On day five, we managed to make more progress than usual and actually made it past the spot that was giving us trouble… Then Shikamaru tripped and fell on his face and when Kiba smelled the blood coming from Shikamaru's nose, he bolted from the house and emptied the contents of his stomach into a couple of nearby bushes. I wouldn't blame Kiba for reacting that way, considering that he now associated the scent of fresh blood with that incident…we'll eventually help him get over that or at least help him cope.

For now, the quest to procure Shisui's ashes was still on!

On day six, our little friend in the shadows decided to help us out. For the first time since we have met him, he finally spoke to us and it was to help us get through our trauma, step by step, as we made our way to Uchiha graveyard. He stayed with us the entire time until we left the house, with Shisui's ashes in our possession.

We stayed still for a moment, not knowing what to do with the urn of ashes we had finally succeeded in securing. Once it set in that we actually succeeded in getting Shisui, without any poor bird imitations from the baby sloth to ruin everything, we started celebrating. We left the Uchiha compound and made it to the nearest Akimichi dango shop around to eat a couple of skewers of dango each. Afterwards, we went to Yamanaka Flowers and handed Shisui's ashes over to Ino's father, Inoichi. Ino had already managed to get the magnolia she had picked out for us to start sprouting.

And by the end of the afternoon, we had everything we needed to for Shisui's tree…except a place to plant it.

"Where are we going to plant it?" Naruto asked out loud.

At that moment, our little friend in the shadows dropped by to hand Itachi a set of keys and a map with directions. We spent a couple of minutes just staring at Itachi as he looked at the keys and map he was given.

"I think we should follow the directions on the map," Chōji decided to break the silence between all of us.

"That is a good idea," Itachi remarked.

The directions on the map led us to a house near the forest. At least, it looked like a house—like one of those traditional Japanese houses. As we neared the house, we noticed the door and then looked at Itachi, who still had the keys in his hand. It took a couple a minutes, but we soon found the right key that opened the door to the house.

It was a two-story house…and it was a little dusty, but otherwise, clean. As we looked around the house, Shikamaru found that there was a message behind the map Itachi was given. It was from the Sandaime, explaining that this place was now Naruto's new home. Naruto was ecstatic, even more so
when he saw the backyard. It was pretty green, for a house that was uninhabited…almost as though someone had been caring for the greenery in their spare time.

We eventually found a spot to plant Shisui's tree. Kiba was quick to dig a hole in a manner similar to a dog digging a hole to bury their bone. Right after, we planted the tree and Naruto watered it.

"Shi-nii happy!" Hanabi exclaimed as she clapped her hands.

We all looked at Shisui's tree and then at Hanabi as she gently patted the little sprout. She was right…Shisui probably was happy.

…

…

We helped Naruto moved his belongings to his new home. Our little friend in the shadows also helped out as well. It was late in the evening when we had finally finished moving everything over from the apartment into the new house…everything except the stove and refrigerator. Naruto's house came with both. It had running water, working bathrooms (two of them) and even a room with a huge bathtub, so no more trips to the bathhouse for Naruto!

Of course, Naruto did say he would still go to the bathhouse from time to time…I swear, if I see him sneaking into the women's side one more time, I will smack him upside the head. If he wants to work on improving his Oiroke no Jutsu, let him do it in his spare time, when Hinata and I are *not* taking a bath!

Our little friend in the shadows gave Naruto an orange baby blanket and a stuffed dog toy. When he tried asking about it, the ANBU just left without saying a word. Naruto blinked and looked at the baby blanket and stuffed animal. It took him a few seconds to put two and two together before he grinned widely and hugged the stuffed dog toy.

"This is mine, isn't it?!" Naruto looked at all of us. "It has to be!"

I found myself looking at Itachi, who had his head turned away from the scene. Methinks he knows the truth of the blanket and stuffed animal…but he's staying quiet. I'm guessing they were keepsakes from Kushina and Minato…if they are, then I'm glad Naruto has them.

…

The next day, we woke up in Naruto's new house. It was oddly refreshing to wake up in a new place… And there was just something about looking at Shisui's tree, thriving in the sunlight. Naruto was definitely happy, and so were we.

And for the first time in three weeks, I felt as if we were going to be okay. We were able to go our separate ways and return home. Itachi and Sasuke stayed with Naruto, as Naruto had offered them a place to stay with him. I think that was honestly the first time I have ever seen Itachi smile like that.

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Our summer vacation soon came to an end and classes at the Academy resumed. One thing we had to deal with upon returning to the Academy was the attention that the other students gave us because we were there on the night the Uchiha clan was massacred. It was rather stressful, especially when some of the girls tried separating Sasuke from us. Even Ino, despite having a crush on Sasuke, knew
better than to do that to the poor kid. Which is why she decided to scare off every girl that tried to approach our group.

Sakura seemed oddly proud of Ino when she dropped by to pick up her friend. And what of Sasuke? He was busy looking at the forsythia flower that had been left at his seat in class, every day for the past week. The reason why he found the flower so peculiar is because it was the same flower that had been left for him in his hospital room.

A forsythia, or a rengyou, was a yellow flower that meant, "Hope" in hanakotoba. Whoever was leaving Sasuke the flower meant well, so there was no harm in receiving the flower... Sasuke seemed oddly content when he learned the flower's meaning. Though, now he, and the rest of us, could only wonder...who was it that was leaving him the flower?

A month passed, and Sasuke continued receiving the flower. The identity of the giver was still unknown, but Sasuke wasn't concerned. He was just intrigued and when he tried asking Ino about it, she just laughed it off and said it was a secret. At this point, Sakura just stopped pulling Ino away and stayed with us.

In a way, Ino and Sakura became part of our circle of friends...but only during lunchtime, because Ino and Sakura were busy girls after classes. Ino had to help her family run their flower shop and Sakura had her medic-nin training. Still, it was nice seeing Ino completing the Ino-Shika-Chō trio... and Sakura completing Team Kakashi. Haha, I befriended the entire Rookie 9.

It was so unreal...but there they were—together...and where did I belong?

I find myself thinking about that quite often. I had a place as their friend, and leader—I won't deny it anymore. But when I started thinking about the future, I worried about Sakura. Would she still be part of Team Kakashi? Or will she be placed on someone else's team?

It's a reasonable concern, and I'm still hoping there's still a chance Sakura will be with Sasuke and Naruto, especially with how well they're getting along. Their relationship is quite different than it would have been, four years ago, had I not replaced Sakura in class.

Ino and Sakura are still friends and I'm honestly happy about it. They knew their boundaries whenever they came across a topic we weren't that willing to share with them just yet. They have a lot to learn about us, but this is a good start as any.

When Naruto turned eight, he received a gift from Iruka-sensei that consisted of his iconic green goggles. Sakura and Ino joined us that day when the Sandaime took us out for ramen at Ichiraku Ramen. Sarutobi looked strained as he paid Teuchi and Ayame, but otherwise content with how we were doing.

A few days later, it was Shisui's sixteenth birthday... Well, it would have been, had he still been alive. Even so, we weren't going to spend the day as any other day, as we had on Shikamaru's eighth birthday. No...we were going to spend it as Shisui would have done.

Starting by sneaking out of class!

Ino and Sakura stayed behind, since they didn't want to intrude on something that seemed so personal to us. Ino said she would cover for us so Iruka-sensei wouldn't notice we were gone, which would help a lot. Even though Neji wasn't part of his class, Iruka-sensei still treated him as though he was.

The first thing we did after sneaking out of class was head to an Akimichi dango shop. Afterwards,
we all made our way to Naruto's house to pay Shisui's tree a visit. Upon nearing Naruto's house, we got sidetracked by a little white snake that crossed our path. Normally, we'd just ignore it, but it was a white snake and I thought it looked cute…leave me alone, I think a lot of things are cute!

Especially birds…god, I love birds…

"Do you think it's poisonous?" Naruto said as he poked at the snake with a stick.

"Venomous, Naruto-kun…you mean to ask if it is venomous," Shino corrected.

Naruto made a face. "What's the difference?"

"Venomous and poisonous differ on how the toxin is delivered," Shikamaru explained.

Yeah, I heard this explanation before. "In the case of a snake, it would be through a bite—Naruto, stop poking the poor snake."

"But we don't know if it's venomous!" Naruto whined. "I don't want it biting any of us…"

"We should leave it alone, then," Neji remarked.

"Can we just look at it a little longer?" It's been a while since I've seen a snake and I really do find snakes adorable…I'm weird. I think I've already established that. Besides, I'm having some memories of this shouji manga I once read, called Kamisama Hajimemashita. Something about white snakes being familiars of Kami…

"Just d-don't let it bite you…" Hinata warned.

"I think Naruto should stop poking it, then," Chōji said.

Sasuke nodded. "Yeah, it might get mad and bite if you keep doing that."

"And venomous or not, that would still hurt…" Aww, Kiba, did you have a bad experience with snakes?

"It is not venomous, if that is what you are concerned about." Who said that? Better question…how do they know?

"How do you know—" I trailed off after turning around to see who it was that had spoken to us. I felt my heart beginning to pound as I found myself staring at red clouds on black cloth. As my eyes slowly trailed up, I soon found myself staring into a pair of golden eyes with slits for pupils that belonged to an extremely pale-skinned man with long, black hair.

There was only one person I knew who fit that description…and that was Orochimaru, one of the legendary Sannin of Konohagakure…who had defected from said village and, based on his current attire, joined the Akatsuki and was currently an active member.

We were looking at an S-ranked missing-nin…of course, only I knew that and that was a fucking problem. I can really think three words and three words only…

**OH GOD WHY?!**

Chapter End Notes
BAM! CLIFFHANGER! Yeah, I'm a horrible person, but give me a break. I already feel bad enough for the entire trauma I've given these characters. I mean, look at poor Kiba and his negative reaction to blood—like really.

Also, if anyone is wondering who could have killed off the entire Uchiha clan, since it wasn't Itachi…who else could have done it? Recall that Itachi didn't singlehandedly kill off his own clan and you'll get your answer.

That aside, the mention of crushes and stuff came up in this chapter…and this is probably the best time to discuss the question of whether or not Chōko will eventually fall in love, because I have gotten questions about it. And she will…however, it's complicated and the reason it's complicated because Chōko is asexual. And for people wondering what that means, basically, Chōko doesn't experience sexual attraction.

What she does experience, is romantic attraction, which is a feeling that causes people to desire a romantic relationship with a specific other person. Someone who does not experience romantic attraction would be aromantic. Just thought I'd add that in. And just because Chōko is asexual doesn't mean she can't find people aesthetically attractive. She's been doing that a lot, if you haven't noticed…Himawari is a major example.

Also, as far as I have seen, Neji/Chōko and Shikamaru/Chōko have gotten some support. Pairings aren't that set in stone yet, unless otherwise, but I am intrigued with what everyone thinks of whom Chōko should end up with (so far, Neji is in the lead). And I'm just gonna say it right now…I ship based on chemistry. I could care less about gender, as I'm pretty open-minded, if you guys haven't noticed. Hope nobody minds.

Moving on, Ino and Sakura have joined the circle of friends…but they're rather busy, so they're only school friends, for the most part. And Sasuke seems to have a secret supporter, who is giving him hope. Rest assured, it isn't Nagito Komaeda from Super Dangan Ronpa 2 giving him the forsythia flowers. This ain't no crossover fic.

And Naruto's moved out of his apartment and into a new home, where our favorite dog-masked ANBU gave him a stuffed dog and an orange baby blanket as a welcoming present. That should be enough hints as to explain the previous owners of Naruto's new house. I could be direct, but meh, I like being ambiguous.

Itachi and Sasuke are now living with Naruto, so that's something. Also, no one likes to visit the Uchiha compound for reasons involving trauma (they're still coping with that, by the way)...they only managed to make it as far as they did because of Shisui. And there are reasons why Itachi would have been suspected as the killer…but I won't say it now.

Anyways, I'd like to give credit to my friend, UnstableFable, for giving me the idea of Naruto not being aware of what he is eating when thoroughly distracted.

Hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! Please excuse the mood whiplash in this chapter! So, until next time, everyone!
"Would you like to touch him?" Orochimaru asked us, moments after he picked the snake off the ground.

It's so fucking weird seeing Orochimaru trying to act friendly with us...keyword: trying. There was something about the way he looked at us that made his friendly demeanor seemed contrived. I'm...not exactly unfamiliar with this side of Orochimaru, and I can blame Rock Lee's Springtime of Youth on it! While I failed to catch up onto the main series, the exact opposite happened with the spin-off and now I can't see Orochimaru as anything more than a joke...for the most part.

I am still aware of how dangerous this guy is, but it's extremely difficult to forget all the gags and punchlines that I had seen Orochimaru do in the spin-off. Regardless of my current circumstances, I'm still in a position where I have to approach our current situation very carefully.

"Kaa-chan says we're not supposed to speak to strangers!" I said carefully, Chōko, not annoying!

Orochimaru tried to brush off my little outburst. "Oh, but I am not a stranger—"

"Strangers also lie!" Might as well roll with this approach, since it's working! I can already see Orochimaru struggling to keep his pretense. "Stranger danger!"

"I have already mentioned that I am not a stran—" Orochimaru never had a chance to finish his sentence because I interrupted him again...like the impulsive idiot I am.

"STRANGER DANGER!" I made sure I was louder when I repeated myself. Before I could even think, impulse took over and I ended up punching Orochimaru in the stomach...or at least, I thought I punched him in the stomach. Judging by his pained reaction and the fact that he keeled over onto the ground upon feeling Akimichi clan strength at maximum overdrive, I think I might have gone lower than I had intended...well, oops! "Guys?"

"Y-Yeah, Chōko-chan?" Naruto was nervous.

"I think we should run..." Because I just fucked up majorly when I punched this guy...and I probably shouldn't be leader anymore. Of course, that should be the least of my worries when we should all be getting our asses out of dodge. We're nothing but Academy students and Orochimaru is a Sannin for a reason! Let us not forget his S-rank missing-nin status, which my friends known nothing about, but thanks to my spontaneous actions, they're just as concerned about fleeing.

Unfortunately, Orochimaru seemed to have anticipated any attempts to abscond beforehand, because suddenly—snakes. Snakes everywhere...they were in our way, hissing at us and definitely showing deimatic behavior. I'm still not sure if they're venomous, but I'd rather not find out the hard way—oh god, it's on me.

"L-Leaving so soon?" And, like an idiot, I looked back to see a very pissed off Orochimaru—did anyone feel a chill go down their spine just now, or was it just me? And—oh god...oh god...oh god...I think I just saw myself getting killed—quite brutally, at that. I think I need a moment—huurk. Hopefully, my stomach settles down once I regain all feeling in my limbs—too late.

Splat!
There goes every skewer of dango and cup of tea I ate and drank within the past two hours. **Gross.** I don't feel good…and my stomach is just making it even worse for myself. And tears—they won't stop! *Why did I look back?* I AM SUCH AN—

**Hiss!**

I tensed as I felt something tickle my ear. I could feel a cold, scaly body circling itself around my neck. "A-aah!"

Oh *god*, I can just *feel* my soul crawling out of my mouth—I liked snakes, but at this moment, I was terrified of them.

"Chōko-san!" Neji, can you not yell? I am trying not to freak out and hearing you freak out is making it worse.

"I-I'm f-f-f-fiiine—aaah!" I am a terrible liar when I am extremely petrified. Of course, I am completely justified in the fact that the snake just tightened itself around my neck. Not much, but I could feel it coiling around my neck and just—aah, it's nerve-wracking. I can feel the goosebumps prickling my skin and I am just seconds away from hyperventilating. My body is shaking and it doesn't help that I'm stuck in a rather uncomfortable position. That is, with the upper-half of my body turned so I could look back. Keeping this position is extremely uncomfortable, but I'd rather not move.

"Get off her, dattebayo!" Naruto, you better not be moving!

**Hiss!**

And it went dead quiet after that. I could hear Kiba starting to whimper, Hinata struggling to keep herself from screaming, and I'm pretty sure that was Sasuke inhaling deeply and exhaling in an attempt to keep himself calm. Shino, Shikamaru, and Chōji haven't said anything since I punched Orochimaru in the vitals (*I swear*, I meant to get him in the stomach!). Meanwhile with me, I'm seconds away from breaking down and this fucking snake is keeps hissing in my ear—oh *god*, that was its *tongue*!

"I would suggest that none of you make any sudden movements." Orochimaru spoke calmly as he smirked at us. "It would be a shame if you were to be bitten.

Translation: Move and you're fucking dead.

"B-Bastard!" Naruto, please don't piss Orochimaru off. I've done enough as is already and our little friend in the shadows isn't around to save our asses. Because the thing with our favorite dog-masked ANBU is that he usually leaves Naruto on his own during classes, usually dropping every hour or so to check up on him. He's probably looking for us right now and I'm hoping he finds us soon before this situation escalates even more than it has already.

Okay, please tell that wasn't a snake that just slithered by me, because it felt bigger than the others—a *lot bigger*. Nonononononono, get off me—GET OFF ME!

**Hiss!**

"Eeek!" The snake around my neck just tightened again. "Ah…"

Oh god, someone *help* me!

"Careful. She can sense your fear." Oh so the snake around my neck is female—*not* the fucking
point! You're enjoying this, aren't you, Orochimaru?! Is this payback for punching you in the crotch?!

Oh god, that explains the giant-ass snake that's starting to curl around me—it's moving higher! I know what it's doing! I've seen ball pythons do this to mice—it's gonna suffocate me! Of course, the snakes I've seen kill mice struck fast, not slow and steady, but this snake belongs to Orochimaru and the fact that I've succeeded in doing nothing but pissing him off says a lot about what could potentially happen to me. And that's my death being slow and painful.

I just realized something…I'm completely terrified about dying. I mean, I always had a fear about dying, but I never realize to what extent. And it took only until I had a giant snake wrapping itself around my body, with a smaller one coiling around my neck, practically threatening to strangle me to realize that.

Why the fuck is this even happening?! Why is Orochimaru even here?! "Aaack!"

"Stop it, dattebayo!" Naruto yelled.

"I will stop if you decide to come with me." Oh god, don't tell me Orochimaru was sent to get Naruto because he's a jinchuuriki. Don't tell me the Akatsuki has started the hunt already. This isn't supposed to happen—not now, at least! "Or would you rather she die?"

Oh god, it's getting hard to breathe—it feels like I'm choking. It's as if I need my inhaler to breathe—but I don't have asthma as Akimichi Chōko! I'm getting crushed by a giant snake! Okay, getting dizzy—vision blurring and it isn't my shitty eyesight, even though my glasses were currently on the ground due to one of my sudden actions.

"Why me-ttebayo?!

"Tick-tock, she is running out of time." Orochimaru, you smarmy bastard, you—ugh, blacking out…

"All right, I'll go!" Naruto yelled frantically. "But—you have to let her, and everyone else, go!"

And those were the magic words that got those snakes off of me and allowed me the pleasure of breathing. I collapsed onto the ground, gasping for air. Sweet, sweet oxygen—never deprive me of thee! It feels good to breathe again, even though it kinda hurts to do so…and see, now that I've picked up my glasses again. Wait, I'm forgetting something—"Naruto!"

"I'm sorry, Chōko-chan…" Naruto looked apologetically at me as he walked over to Orochimaru, who just looked so fucking smug.

"You heard the little boy." Fuck you, Orochimaru! I will not stand for this—okay, I can't even stand right now!

"Aaugh!" And back onto the ground, I go. I should not try standing up. Not while my body is still hurting, ow…

"Ch-Chōko-chan!" Hey, Hinata, you look…fine? Okay, you don't. Your eyes are red (which is really obvious, due to the white eyes), and you are shaking uncontrollably. "Wh-Wh-What's g-g-going to h-h-happen?"

"I…don't know…but we can't let Naruto go." Like hell I'm letting that happen!
Luckily for us, at that moment, our little friend in the shadows showed up and intervened, by killing of every snake within our vicinity. Yeah, you're a little late, pal, but it's better late than never!

Eww, snake guts!

Then an unsuspected third party decided to intrude in the form of yet another Akatsuki member with a large, mechanical scorpion-like tail. Said tail was used to strike the ANBU, and if I recalled something, if vaguely, wasn't that the poison that caused painful paralysis and was used against Kankurō? That being said, I seemed to have forgotten that the Akatsuki travel in pairs, which would make the member who just finished incapacitating our little friend in the shadows...Sasori, in his disguise as his favorite puppet, Hiruko.

"ANBU-san!" Naruto yelled moments before being promptly knocked out by Orochimaru. Naruto's unconscious body fell onto the ground, which was then picked up by Hiruko's tail. Before any of us could react, Orochimaru and Sasori (Hiruko—whatever) disappeared into the nearby woods.

"Oh my god..." This is a nightmare—we can't let them leave! But the ANBU... "Chōji, Hinata, Shino, Kiba. I need one of you to run off to get help. The rest of you, try and get ANBU-san to the hospital. He needs help."

We don't have time to stand around doing nothing!

"Wh-What happened to him?" Hinata looked nervously at the poor ANBU.

"Poison," Shino said as a matter of fact. "I believe there is still some on his body. This may prove useful in treating his state."

"You have to get him to the hospital fast, though," Shikamaru sighed. "How troublesome."

"Shut up!" I snapped at Shikamaru. I didn't mean to sound so harsh, but I'm like trying not to freaking lose it because fuck—they have Naruto. "You, Neji-sa, Sasuke, and me are gonna be going after Naruto! Shino, track us with one of your bugs! Kiba...are you okay?"

"S-Sorry, it's the blood." Kiba was covering his nose, his expression showing his nausea quite clearly. "I'll go get help!"

Kiba ran off without saying another word. Right after he left, Hinata and Chōji started to try and drag the ANBU's body. Meanwhile with Shino, he was busy placing some of his insects on us. Immediately after Sasuke had been bugged (no pun intended...maybe—I seriously need an outlet right now so screw it!), he ran off after Naruto. Neji followed right after, with Shikamaru and me soon trailing after the two of them. I can't believe we are doing this.

I know we are not going to be successful in getting Naruto back...but the reason I had all of us go was so we could lead whatever help Kiba managed to get in order to rescue Naruto. Neji would be useful in scoping out Naruto. Sasuke, regardless of what I had said, would have gone after Naruto. The two are just that close. And Shikamaru is smart and level-headed enough to keep us all on track.

As for me...this is my fault. I was the reason Naruto had been convinced to go with Orochimaru. It was because of me that our little friend in the shadows got poisoned with a toxin that had no antidote just yet, as it was years too early for such a poison to be introduced to Konohagakure. The ANBU might as well have been dead, but...I'm still hoping for a miracle.

Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong...it's usually assumed to be Murphy's Law, but that is a mistake. In actuality, that is Finagle's Law. Murphy's Law is summed up as "If something can be
used or done a right way and a wrong way, and the wrong way will lead to catastrophe, it will be used or done the wrong way." It's something I found out, sometime before I died...

Finagle's Law was not a kind one in the world of Naruto, as shown by what had just happened. Still, I wasn't one to give up—at least, not as Akimichi Chōko. I'm willing to fight before I decide to give up. Because Orochimaru and Sasori just took my friend away and I will not stand for this—not me, nor any of my friends.

Shisui wouldn't want this on his birthday and god dammit, I will make sure this day doesn't become the day Konohagakure lost its jinchuuriki—our friend, Uzumaki Naruto. We've lost too many people this year and we'll be damned if we lose yet another person who we hold dear to us.

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Neji was surprisingly good at tracking down Naruto's kidnappers. There was something strange about them, though. For a couple of S-ranked missing-nin, they sucked at throwing off a group of Academy students. Sure, we had a Hyuuga on us—but he is only nine-years-old. He still doesn't have enough experience to even be on equal grounds with people like Orochimaru and Sasori.

"They're purposely trying to get us to follow." Shikamaru figured it out. "They want to make sure we keep following."

"Is he aware that we are clan children?" Neji was predictably concerned. As a Hyuuga from the Branch House who was tasked in protecting Hinata, the Main House's heiress, he had all reason to worry.

"Why did you think I told Hinata to stay behind?" I'm not stupid. I know she'd be vulnerable to people, like Orochimaru, who would most likely be interested in children from kekkei genkai clans. Which is why I'm worried about Sasuke. He and Itachi are the last of their clan—including a certain Uchiha who is presumably dead, but isn't, but that's spoilers.

Back on Sasuke, it is years too early for him to encounter Orochimaru. And considering the circumstances, I'm worried that Orochimaru might use Naruto as a bargaining chip in order to get Sasuke to come with him. I am terrified of that outcome. I don't want to lose any more of my friends.

No more, no more, no more!

Shisui was bad enough as is and the Uchiha Clan Massacre just did nothing to help with my deteriorating mental health. I still have nightmares about it—just not as often as I did during those first two weeks.

They're still so fucking bad though...

"We need to keep Sasuke-san safe." Neji caught on to Sasuke's status.

"Troublesome…" Shikamaru tried to lighten up our situation, but it was easy to tell that he was just as stressed as we are. "Are you okay, Chōko?"

"It hurts when I breathe," Otherwise, I'm completely fine… Of course, that may be the adrenaline keeping me going—which may not be that good of a sign. "What about you guys?"

"He did nothing to us," Neji replied. "It was just you, who he had hurt. We just watched and—I'm sorry I did nothing to help."
"Don't!" Dammit, don't blame yourself! "You were just as helpless as me and—it's my fault he did that because I pissed him off—"

"Chōko, shut up!" Sasuke snapped angrily at me. "It's not your fault! It's his, for being a creepy bastard! You knew something was up, so you did what you have to do."

"Sasuke's right," Shikamaru agreed, looking just as mad as Sasuke. "It's thanks to you that we didn't lower our guard around him. So worry about yourself for once! You almost died!"

I...I...

"I almost died..." I wanted to cry...I really wanted to cry, because it's starting to set in now. I almost died...but I can't cry—not now.

"Do you need a hug?" Aww, Neji...thank you.

"Not now, but later..." I'll make sure to smack a sticker onto your head by then. "We need to get Naruto...how far ahead are they?"

"Not too far," Neji quickly replied. "How long do you think it'll be before they send in help?"

"Depends how long it takes for them to get to Shino." I seriously hope that's fast enough.

Ever since the Uchiha Clan Massacre, our families have become extremely protective of Naruto. Even the Hyuuga, the clan that took the longest to warm up to Naruto, were just as protective of him. Of course, no one was as protective as Itachi, who was probably still at the Sandaime's office, having a serious talk with the guy. He didn't tell us the details. Whatever it was, it probably involved his ANBU captain status.

That probably should have been a sign not to skip class, because Itachi wasn't around to protect us, as he would have, had he been with us. And Shisui was gone...so it was just us. We weren't armed, all we really had were the knowledge of some of our clans' techniques...well, everyone, but Naruto and I, did. That aside, we were still nothing but Academy students who picked the wrong time to skip class.

We weren't ready for this...and we knew that.

But we still had to try.

...

Eventually, our chase came to an end. I have no idea how long we had been chasing after Orochimaru and Sasori, but it felt as if they were leading us in circles. Upon thinking that, I came to a realization...they were leading us in circles. The outskirts of Konohagakure were surrounded by a forest before the outer walls that enclosed the entire village. As far as I know, there are only four entrance gates leading into (and out of) Konoha. I'm not exactly sure how close we are to the nearest one, but I am concerned.

I was even more concerned when Orochimaru and Sasori just stood there and did nothing. Of course, Orochimaru looked as if he was enjoying the hell out of this. I'm not too sure about Sasori...or Hiruko. Bluh.

Well, this is unnerving...
"Give back Naruto!" Oh shit, forgot we had an angry, possessive Uchiha on our hands!

"Sasuke, no!" Did you not see the ANBU go down to Sasori's poison?! We are Academy students! I will not allow you to endanger your life!

I can't lose you too!

"H-Hey!" No, Sasuke, you are staying with us! I am done losing everyone I've come to know and love—holy crap, is that the Sharingan?! Nononono—put it away, Sasuke, put it away! I tried putting my hand over Sasuke's eyes, but it was too late.

"Ah, so he is an Uchiha." Orochimaru saw.

"We're not letting you near him!" Neji said firmly as he got in front of Sasuke and me.

"And a Hyuuga..." Dammit, Orochimaru is just collecting information now! "Which House are you from?"

"None of your business!" You tell him, Neji!

Shikamaru, what are you doing? You've been oddly quiet—oh, you're probably in the middle of using your Kagemane. Wait, you're only eight years old—do you even have the chakra reserves to handle it? Better question...will it work?

"I'm using it on Sasuke, if you're worried." Oh, are you trying to help me keep this kid at our side? Thank you, Shikamaru.

"Wh-What the hell?!" Sasuke stopped struggling, much to my relief...then I realize that Shikamaru also included my shadow.

"Sh-Shikamaru!" Oh god, this feels so weird. "Wh-What the hell, man?! Mmmph!"

When Shikamaru covered his mouth, I did as well...and so did Sasuke. I was mad...because Shikamaru purposely included my shadow, along with Sasuke's, to shut me up. I guess he was afraid I might endanger myself again, as I had done earlier. I'd appreciate it if you haven't pulled that crap without me knowing, ya jerk!

"A Nara is also amongst you." Orochimaru sounded very intrigued...then he looked at me. "And just what clan are you from?"

For once, I am quite glad I have a fast metabolism fucking up my body build. Because otherwise, Orochimaru would know I am from the Akimichi clan.

"Isn't that the brat who knocked you down?" And Sasori finally speaks and eeeugh, that voice is creepy.

Orochimaru seemed annoyed with Sasori's question. I guess he'll never live down the day an eight-year-old girl punched him in the crotch. The fact that even happened just says a lot about how unpredictable I have been in order for Orochimaru to not dodge. Oh, he'll never hear the end of this back at the Akatsuki base...wait, isn't that in Amegakure, where Shisui, Itachi, and Iruka took their Chuunin exams?

...
Oh god, I just realized something…this isn't a kidnapping. There is an ulterior motive behind this…That's why Orochimaru and Sasori let us follow them! That's why they're still in the village, when they could have been long gone by now!

As someone else was the cause of the Uchiha Clan Massacre, Itachi had no reason to defect from his own village and stayed with us. Because he stayed behind, he had yet to join the Akatsuki. Because he had yet to join the Akatsuki, Konoha was vulnerable to their direct movements, because Itachi's membership had included a stipulation against such.

That's why Orochimaru and Sasori were here. The more I thought about it, the more apparent it became that the actual reason the two of them were here, in Konoha, was to recruit Itachi. I doubt the Akatsuki would overlook Itachi during the Chuunin exams, which is why this is the point of normalization. If not the Uchiha Clan Massacre, then this could potentially cause our friend—our older brother figure of sorts—to leave. We lose either Naruto, or Itachi…that's what this might come to.

I don't want this…I don't want this! "Aaaaugh!"

"C-Crap!" Shikamaru swore.

I think I just broke out of his Kagemane…holy shit. Guess Akimichi clan strength also works on shadows—not the point! "Hey, you! Yeah, you—snake bastard! I know who you are!"

Orochimaru's left twitched slightly upon hearing me insult him. "Do you?"

"You're the Sannin that got butt-hurt because he wasn't chosen to be the Yondaime!" I might have not been able to say anything earlier, but now, this is something that I know I should know, because I've been reading Itachi's history books. Itachi is a history-buff of his own village, which pays a lot when he decides to leave his books around in the open for me to grab and take home with me. He gets annoyed when I borrow them without his permission, but all I usually get is a forehead poke and then another book. Let me just say…Itachi likes to annotate his books, and while he's no Shisui, his deadpan humor makes reading his history books a hell of a lot more interesting than it already is.

I'm pretty sure I dug my own grave, but I was pissed off. I don't do well when I'm extremely mad. There is a reason I had to take anger management classes when I was younger in my past life. It was because I had a hard time controlling my own emotions. I have the same problem here, if only because I still have the body of a child with a still developing brain. Some things are just out of my own control. Age is one of them.

"You insolent, little brat—" Orochimaru is pissed.

Meanwhile with Sasori, he seemed intrigued, in his own way. "I wonder how a child would fare in my collection."

Oh shit, is he talking about that collection? Nononono, I'm not interested in becoming a puppet!

"You can have her after I'm done with her," Orochimaru said darkly. "I'll try not to damage her body too much…"

That's comforting. Now I have two S-ranked missing-nin after me in a manner that results in the end of my life. There is nothing awesome about this. This is a nightmare!

"Dammit!" What's wrong now, Shikamaru—Sasuke, no!
"Katon Goukakyuu no Jutsu!" Unlike every other attempt to use the technique, this time, around… Sasuke managed to successfully create a rather powerful flamethrower. I couldn't help but think of Pokémon at the moment, even though I should be more concerned about the fact that Sasuke was within range of Sasori and Orochimaru.

However, thanks to Sasuke’s Goukakyuu, Sasori and Orochimaru split up and went in two different directions when they dodged his flamethrower. Unfortunately, we now had no idea where the hell they were, thanks to the abundance of trees within our vicinity. They could be in any of them right now…

"Watch out!" Neji yelled before pushing us all out of the way from a barrage of needles that now impaled the ground we once stood on. We were almost hit—are those needles poisoned?! God dammit, Sasori is intending to kill us!

"Find someone else to join your damn collection!" I refuse to become a puppet! That's it—I thought it wouldn't come to this, but I really have no choice at this point! "Hold my glasses!"

Neji was rather surprised when I just handed him my glasses. "Ah…”

I didn't bother letting Neji say anything as my hands formed into a Tiger hand seal and I quickly yelled out, "Suiton Teppōdama!"

What happened next resulted in me spitting out condensed balls of water out of my mouth. I managed to spat out at least five water balls, which I had aimed at the trees around us. I was aiming to throw off Orochimaru and Sasori, because the power in my technique isn't as lethal as it could be. I'm still in the process of learning how to use this technique.

While I did say that Naruto and I were the exception in us not knowing any clan techniques, I never did say we didn't have any other techniques up our sleeves. During the time Shisui and Itachi had spent training Sasuke, Naruto, and me, while everyone else was absent, Shisui had managed to get us three special paper in order to discover what our affinities are. Naruto was, predictably, a wind-type, Sasuke was a lightning-type (Shisui found this amusing) and I was a water-type. No fire-types here, despite this being Fire Country! How is that for irony?!

…

Okay, Sasuke most likely had fire as his secondary (it's an Uchiha thing), so it isn't that ironic, but I digress. That aside, none of us, but Sasuke, knew any elemental techniques. And the only elemental technique Sasuke even knew was the Goukakyuu and that had been part of his clan's rite of passage of sort—again, it's an Uchiha thing. Shisui wanted to start working on Naruto and me the next summer after that, but…yeah…he never had the chance.

The only reason I knew the Teppōdama was because Itachi wanted to continue what Shisui had planned, starting with me. As the Teppōdama shared the same rank as the Goukakyuu, he decided it shouldn't be that difficult for me to learn and it wasn't—well, it was at first. I mean, being able to convert your chakra into water isn't exactly the easiest thing to do. Especially when I keep thinking of SCIENCE when stuff like that happens and then my brain starts hurting and headaches ruin concentration.

Itachi had plans on working on Naruto right after he finished with me…Naruto was my practice dummy. Part of the goal with me was to improve my aim, while Naruto was supposed to improve his dodging. The more he dodged, the more inclined I was to improve my aim, the more Naruto got hit, the more incentive he had to learn how to dodge better.
So far, my Teppōdama hurts like a paintball hitting someone without proper armor. So as weak as it is, in that sense, it still does hurt to get hit and there is a chance I can cause some serious harm. I'm not exactly sure if Orochimaru and Sasori knew that, as the two of them both jumped out of the trees where two of my water balls hit. Sasuke didn't give any of them a chance to land, as he was quick to use his Goukakyuu on them.

Once again, they dodged and I knew this was going to get nowhere, but it was stalling for time. And that had been the goal: To stall while everyone else gets help.

I nearly had a heart attack when Neji decided to rush to Orochimaru, with his Byakugan activated and his body most likely ready to use the Jūken.

"Neji!" You're gonna get your ass killed, idiot! And you still have my glasses!

"That's Neji-san!" Neji yelled as he tried using the Jūken on Orochimaru. Even when in a risky situation, Neji still had the gall to enforce formality. That's what I thought at first, at least…then I realized that this was his way of venting his anxiety. He needed something to keep him grounded, and this was how he did it.

Orochimaru dodged and kept dodging every strike that Neji made at him. I knew Orochimaru was just playing with Neji, giving him the false hope that he could even land a hit. It was as obvious as the smirk on that snake bastard's face. Orochimaru was observing Neji, and that scared me. Neji seemed just as worried as I was.

I decided to give the Teppōdama another shot. This time, every water ball was aimed at Orochimaru. Orochimaru dodged, as predicted…but managed to time his dodging so that some of my water balls ended up hitting Neji right in the stomach. I think it was enough to knock the wind right out of him. It sure did look like it, considering he was now on the ground, writhing in pain.

"N-Neji!" Oh fuck, I wasn't aiming for you! "Are you okay?!"

"I'm f-fine…" Don't lie to me, Neji! I can tell you are not okay!

"You are pretty strong for a child." Oh fuck me sideways…Orochimaru is behind me, isn't he? "I never did find out which clan you belong to."

"Stay away from her!" Shikamaru yelled. "Kagemane no Jutsu!"

The Kagemane would have been helped immensely with my situation…if only Orochimaru wasn't strong enough to resist it.

"Dammit!" Shikamaru swore. "Agh…"

Thud!

Shikamaru just collapsed, due to the major downside of the Kagemane is that it is tiring to use repeatedly. Shikamaru is still only eight. He has a long ways to go before he could use it to the extent he did during the Chuunin Exams Arc. He was fine using it on Sasuke and me, but on Orochimaru…that must have been his limit.

Hiss!

"Ahh!" Oh god, snake—snake!

"Remember this little one?" Oh don't tell that that's the snake we found on our way to Naruto's house
—dammit, it is! "He told me that you said he was cute. Is that true?"

I did, but at this moment, I don't think so. "Get it off…"

"He has also told me there was boy with similar markings as you," Orochimaru continued. "And from what I can assume about that boy's build, is that he belongs to the Akimichi clan—is that your clan?"

I'm not saying anything. Fuck you, Orochimaru—I'm done with this shit! I grabbed the snake off my neck and threw it right in Orochimaru's face. It felt so gross to touch its cold, scaly body, but it felt good to see it smack Orochimaru in the face. I saw an opening…and I took it.

"Suiton Teppōdama!" Five water balls shot out of my mouth and hit Orochimaru right in the stomach. That was for Neji, you ass!

*Thud!*

I don't know about you, but seeing an S-ranked missing-nin fall to an attack from an eight-year-old girl was hilarious.

"Katon Goukakyuu no Jutsu!" Sasuke was still trying to get Naruto from Sasori, but to no avail.

Again, we are only but Academy students and they are S-ranked missing-nin. The most we can do is incapacitate them, as I have done with Orochimaru—then again, I am quite spontaneous and prone to impulse and—OH MY GOD I CAN'T BELIEVE I JUST DID THAT. I don't feel good—I need to get away from Orochimaru right now!

"Shikamaru!" First, I need to get him away from Orochimaru as well. Poor Shikamaru was just sitting on the ground, panting heavily. He was exhausted, I was panicking, Neji was still recovering, and Sasuke didn't give a damn about his own life because Sasori had Naruto, his *friend*. We are a fucking mess— "Augh!"

*Thud!*

Ow…who the hell grabbed my ankle?! "Aaaah…hi?"

I found myself looking back at an extremely pissed off Orochimaru. He still had his grip on my ankle—ow, ow, ow, ow! And he was tightening his grip even harder—fak!

"You have made a fool out of me for the last time." Did I hurt your pride or something, you smarmy bastard? Ow! "You will regret ever crossing me."

"Ahhh!" Oh god, that fucking *hurts*— "Aaaaaaugh!"

I let out a particularly loud, pained scream as Orochimaru's grip increased tenfold. As this went on, Orochimaru stood up, his grip never once releasing my ankle. As a result, I soon found myself hanging upside down as Orochimaru kept increasing the pressure on my ankle. It kept increasing afterwards until—

*Crack!*

A sickening crack caught my ears. A moment afterwards, pain shot through my left leg. It was unimaginable. I tried to keep myself from crying, but it hurt too much. I felt sick—it hurt so much and just…I was crying. Almost immediately, all my friends reacted to my crying by calling out my name.
Orochimaru responded by twisting my already broken ankle. That, paired up with the fact that I was upside down, my weight doing nothing to help—I screamed. The pain was agonizing. "It must be nice having friends who care about you…which is why it will all be the more satisfying to see you breathing your last breaths as they watch your life end before their eyes."

"Not my student, you bastard!" I felt my heart practically skip a beat upon hearing his voice—Iruka's.

Soon, I found myself being dropped and landing into the arms of someone who made me feel safe and secure, right after hearing Orochimaru's pained grunts.

"Are you fine, Chōko?" Iruka asked me.

"M-My ankle!" It still hurts like a bitch! "And my glasses!"

"Neji-san has them," Iruka was quick to tell me. "Here you go."

I was quick to put on my glasses after Iruka handed them to me. I looked at Iruka, and then at Neji, who was at his side. Neji was clutching onto his stomach, looking rather pained, but otherwise, fine.

"I'm so sorry, Neji-san!" I never meant to hit you."

"D-Don't apologize…" Neji strained. "Your attack—it's gotten stronger."

I felt my face heat up. "You idiot—!"

Leave it to Neji to say something like this in this situation!

"What's good is that you're all still alive!" Oh man, I can already hear the future lecture Iruka-sensei is going to give us once this is all over. Still—it feels good to see him here. "I'm not so sure about you!"

As if on cue, a certain dango-loving kunoichi jumped out of the trees with Shino on her back.

"Sorry if I'm late!" Anko exclaimed. "Now where is that snake bastard?!"

Whoa, Anko has so many irons in the fire! It was made even more apparent when she let out a colorful string of curses upon seeing Orochimaru pulling out a couple of shuriken and kunai from his arms. It was enough to make Iruka, Neji, Sasuke (who had decided to regroup with us), Shikamaru, and I, blush rather hard. I swear Anko could make a sailor blush—if they existed here…did they? Okay, not the time to think about stuff like that!

"Hello again, Anko," Orochimaru seemed amused to see his former apprentice among us. "How have you been?"

"Doing a hell of a lot better without you in my life!" Anko spat before taking Shino off her back. "Go regroup with your friends."

Shino did just that and was the one who helped Shikamaru off the ground. It was a good thing that Shino was currently the tallest out of our group (it made it easier to help Shikamaru), with the exception of Neji, who was older than the rest of us by a year. Speaking of Neji, I found myself being propped onto his back before Iruka left to go handle Sasori.

"Watch his tail!" Don't get poisoned, Iruka-sensei! "Wh-Whoa!"

"I got you…" Neji adjusted his hold on me and made sure I wasn't going to slip off his back. "Put
your arms around my neck if you have to. I'm not letting you walk on that ankle."

"Thank you for caring." You're getting two stickers for this—oh my god, Chōko, forget about the stickers! Ugh, if this is seriously how I'm coping with the anxiety of the situation, then I need better coping mechanisms…maybe.

"Since we have everything handled, how about you all leave?" Anko was basically telling us to scram. And we did…except for Sasuke, who decided to stay behind!

"Sasuke!" I yelled as we rushed ahead without him. "We need to go back for him!"

"We can't," Shikamaru said. "We're not exactly in the best position to drag him back with us. How troublesome…"

"Which is why I consider it his fault if anything bad happens to Iruka!" Oh hello, Anko, what are you doing here—Sasuke!

"Let me go!" Sasuke struggled to get out of Anko's grip as she carried him over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "I can't leave Naruto behind!"

"We were gonna get the kid back!" Anko snapped. "All you had to do was leave it to us!"

"I'm not leaving Naruto behind!" Sasuke stressed. "He's my friend…"

Sasuke…are you crying? Oh god, he is… "Sasuke, it's okay—"

"No it's not!" Sasuke yelled. "I'm gonna lose him like I lost Shisui and everyone else…I don't want to lose him—especially to bastards like them!"

"I hear ya, kid, but you can't do everything on your own against people like them." Anko's tone softened. "They're dangerous—didn't you see what they did to ANBU-san? And that snake bastard—he's just as dangerous."

"You sound as if you recognize him," Shino remarked.

Anko made a face. "Yeah, I do…I'd rather keep quiet about this for now. Maybe one day, I'll tell you guys since you got involved with him. For now, I need you kids to stay here or leave to the hospital. I'm not sure if Iruka can handle the two of them on his own—"

At that moment, a huge flash of fire caught our eyes. We stared as we could hear Iruka's voice call out a couple of Fire Release techniques.

"Hey, did you know that Iruka-sensei did really well during the Chuunin exams in Ame?" I found myself saying.

"Nii-san and Shisui said that the Sandaime said that Iruka was too nice for ANBU," Sasuke remarked.

Cue the simultaneous, "What?" from Anko, Shino, Neji, and Shikamaru. Naruto, Sasuke, and I were all told this information back in the day when everyone was absent due to their training regimens. Shisui and Itachi weren't the only ones considered for recruitment into ANBU, from what I gathered from this tidbit of information. It was just that Iruka wasn't recruited (Thank god! I can't handle having Mizuki as an instructor...). So Iruka was probably the most capable of handling two S-ranked missing-nin, apart from Anko, who is stuck with us because Sasuke didn't want to leave.
"If that's the case, then you guys should trust Iruka and me to get Naruto back," Anko decided to change the subject. "Just leave it to us."

"No!" Sasuke yelled. "I just…Naruto…"

"Look, kid, I'll get him back, or I'll die trying." Knowing Anko, she meant what she said. "Can you at least take my word for it?"

"You don't have to," a voice suddenly said. "There's been a change in plans."

Almost instantly, we all turned to see Itachi with Kiba on his back. Kiba hopped off Itachi's back and ran over to us to regroup. He was trying to tell us frantically what had happened, but Shino told him to calm down and Kiba did just that…or at least, tried. Meanwhile with Itachi, he just looked at us and sighed in relief.

"Nii-san!" Sasuke exclaimed. "Naruto is—"

Itachi nodded. "I know…you can put him down, Anko-san."

And just like that, Anko dropped Sasuke like a sack of potatoes. Sasuke was quick to land on his feet and then jump towards Itachi to give his older brother a hug. Itachi returned the hug, smiling as he held Sasuke in his arms. There was something off about Itachi, though. The melancholic look in his eyes was hard to ignore.

"Sasuke…there's something I need to tell you." Just hearing Itachi say that…whatever it was—it wasn't good.

"Wh-What is it, Nii-san?" Sasuke caught on.

"I'm…going to get Naruto back," Itachi began. "I can promise you that I'll do anything to bring him back safely. Shisui entrusted Naruto into my care and I'll make sure to follow through with what Shisui would have done, had he still been alive. Before anything, I need you to promise me this…"

"What?" Sasuke asked.

"Promise you'll keep Naruto safe." It felt strange to see Itachi say something like that to Sasuke. "Make sure he never stops smiling. Make sure he won't ever be alone. Make sure…he knows that he's important."

Sasuke looked at Itachi with disbelief. "Why are you saying stuff like this? Nii-san…what's going to happen?"

"Just promise me, Sasuke…" Itachi repeated.

Sasuke hesitated at first, but then nodded. "I promise."

"Good." Itachi smiled warmly as he poked Sasuke on the forehead. "Congratulations on activating your Sharingan. I'm sorry can't do anything right now—goodbye."

Before any of us could even say anything to Itachi, he left without saying another word. Minutes passed, we stayed in our place, just waiting. We were anticipating the outcome of Itachi's interference. Nothing was happening. It was quiet—too quiet.

After a total of twenty minutes, Iruka came back, carrying an unconscious Naruto in his arms. We were quick to swarm him, now that Naruto was back with us. He was still out cold, but for now, we
were just happy he was back with us. Then we noticed that Itachi was missing.

"Iruka-sensei, where's Nii-san?" Sasuke asked.

Iruka grimaced. "I'm sorry, Sasuke…but Itachi-san won't be coming back."

"What?" The look on Sasuke's face was just heartbreaking. "Wh-Why?!"

"It was the only way he could get Naruto back," Iruka explained. "Those two wanted him—not Naruto. They knew how close Naruto was to all of you and him…"

"That's why they kidnapped him…" There was just something extremely scary about being right about the things you don't want right. This was it…I had been hoping that Orochimaru and Sasori weren't here to recruit Itachi—but they had. And because of that, Itachi was gone—no, not yet.

That's what Sasuke seemed to think, as he seemed about ready to run after Itachi, but Anko stopped him. Sasuke struggled and started calling out for Itachi, telling him to come back. When he received no response, Sasuke started crying. He continued calling out for Itachi, even as Anko and Iruka escorted us out of the forest and to the hospital.

As much as we wanted to follow after Itachi—to bring him back—we were in no condition to be going anywhere but the hospital. Unlike last time, the nurses learned their lesson and gave us rooms close to each other. That was where we met up with Hinata and Chōji. Neither of them was harmed in any manner, but was mostly there for a check-up—just in case. Shino and Kiba were also in a similar state.

Naruto was surprisingly unharmed, but he was placed in a hospital room. He hasn't woken up yet…Sasuke had to be sedated, due to how upset he had been and how much he struggled to escape. He had a couple of scrapes, here and there, but nothing too serious. Meanwhile with Shikamaru, he was on the verge of chakra exhaustion, what with his Kagemane eating up a lot of his chakra. Neji had a rather nasty bruise on his abdomen and, upon closer inspection, actually had a cracked rib. Adrenaline had a hand in masking the pain of his fractured rib, which is why he said absolutely nothing about it when he had carried me on his back.

As for me, I had it worse. I had bruises around my neck, torso, and legs—the type that comes from being immobilized and almost strangled and crushed to death. My ribs had been bruised, which explained why it hurt to breathe. My ankle had been broken (courtesy of Orochimaru), but otherwise, I haven't been too badly injured.

At least, that's what Sakura told me when she went to check up on us. When I had asked her about our friend in the shadows, Sakura frowned and told me that he wasn't doing too well. That the poison was too complex, which is why many medic-nin and their assistants were going to be working together to make an antidote to counteract the poison. The fact that medic-nin assistants were involved showed just how desperate they were.

"I'm going to be helping," Sakura said. "I've never done this before…"

"Are you scared?" I found myself asking Sakura.

Sakura nodded. "Yeah, but I'm okay…how are you doing?"

"Fine, if a little bit in pain." I got told that was normal, despite having been healed my medic-nin. I'm just glad I'll be able to start walking in a few days…"Good luck with your job."

"Thank you." Sakura smiled at me and then left the room.
And within the next twenty-four hours, an antidote had been created. Many medic-nin had a hand in the antidote's production, but Haruno Sakura had been given honorable mention for her careful work and main contribution for concocting an antidote. It had been the first time someone as young as Sakura, a medic-nin's assistant, no less, had accomplished such a feat.

When we heard the news...well, all of us, sans Sasuke and Naruto, both of whom were still unconscious, we set out of our rooms to look for Sakura. When we found her, minding her own business, still receiving praise from passing nurses and medic-nin, we pulled her into a group hug. Sakura seemed to appreciate the action, as she had been extremely stressed throughout the whole antidote concocting process.

"I was so scared," Sakura confessed. "I still can't believe I even did that..."

"P-People are talking about you!" Hinata brought up.

"You're showing a lot of promise for someone as young as you," Neji added.

Sakura thought for a moment and nodded. "Yeah...thanks."

"Hey...how is ANBU-san?" Kiba decided to ask. "Did you get to see his face?"

Sakura shook her head. "No...assistants weren't allowed into the room and only a few medic-nin entered the room. They were mostly there to restrain ANBU-san when the head medic-nin used the Saikan Chuushutsu no Jutsu to extract the poison from his body. I heard it's quite painful."

"Yeesh..." I'm starting to have flashbacks of Sakura extracting poison from Kankurō's body. Imagining that happening to our little friend in the shadows is a bit discomforting. Hopefully, our friend is doing fine.

"I feel bad for ANBU-san." Chōji frowned.

"At least he's healing," Shikamaru remarked.

"Speaking of healing—what are you guys doing out of your rooms?" Sakura looked sternly at us.

"We heard the good news and wanted to congratulate you," Shino replied. "Was it too much or not enough?"

Sakura looked at Shino for a moment and laughed. "No, it's fine...just I don't think the nurses will appreciate you guys leaving your rooms."

"Well, we're going to check up on Naruto, so if you can keep the nurses away from us, that'll be just lovely." I'm honestly surprised that Naruto has been unconscious for this long. Then again, Orochimaru had been the one to knock him out...

"I'll see what I can do." Sakura sighed. "But be careful."

When we entered Naruto's hospital room, the he had just woken up. He was in the process of rubbing his eyes when he recalled what happened and quickly looked at us.
"What happened to you, Chōko-chan?!" Naruto must have noticed the crutches I was using in the meantime until my ankle completely healed.

"Nothing too badly, ahaha…” I'm really glad Naruto wasn't there to see Orochimaru break my ankle. I'm not too sure about how Shikamaru, Neji, and Sasuke felt…speaking of Sasuke, Naruto seemed to have noticed he wasn't in the room.

"Where's Sasuke?" Naruto asked as he looked around the room.

"Sasuke-kun is still unconscious," Shino replied. "Sakura-san said that he'll be waking within the hour."

"Oh…what about ANBU-san?" Naruto frowned. "Is he…?"

"He's still alive," Shikamaru was quick to answer. "Thanks to Sakura and the other medic-nin, they managed to make an antidote for the poison in his bloodstream."

"Eeugh, please don't mention blood…” Kiba looked queasy.

"We really need to work on your hemophobia…” Otherwise, poor Kiba will never make it far into the shinobi life.

"Hana is already working on it," Kiba remarked.

"H-How is it going?" Hinata asked.

"Still have a long ways to go," Kiba sighed. "That's enough about me, though! Hey, hey…Naruto… you wanna go check up on Sasuke?"

At that moment, we all heard the door opened and we immediately turned to see whom it was. We were expecting a nurse, one who came to investigate the outburst Naruto had made earlier. Of course, instead of a nurse, it was Sasuke who had entered the room. Well, speak of the devil.

Sasuke stared at us for a moment before shifting his attention to Naruto. Slowly, Sasuke began walking toward Naruto. The closer he got, the more noticeable it was that he had been crying. I wouldn't blame Sasuke for crying and, honestly, I'm amazed that none of us is crying yet. Then again, maybe there's this small hope that Itachi will come back, even though Iruka said otherwise. We haven't received word of what had happened just yet and maybe we all thought that Itachi would soon return to us.

That made me think—Naruto hasn't heard about Itachi yet. He doesn't know that Itachi took his place. That's probably why Sasuke is having a hard time saying anything to Naruto. It was only until Sasuke was hugging Naruto, an act that caught the blond by complete surprise, that Sasuke finally said something.


"Wh-What?" Naruto's eyes widened.

"Nii-san said…he would bring you back, no matter what," Sasuke explained. "And he did…but now he's gone—and the nurses outside are saying he's left the village. They're calling him a traitor!"

Whatever hope we had in Itachi returning to us was shattered as gossip from hospital nurses only confirmed that people were now talking about it. And the content of said gossip only concerned us to the extent that Naruto was near seconds away from a panic attack as he and the rest of us started
crying.

If Shisui were here, he wouldn't have wanted us to cry. Unfortunately, he wasn't here and to make matters worse, neither was Itachi and that really just made what would have been Shisui's sixteenth birthday, which was yesterday, a day we wouldn't be forgetting anytime soon.

Sometimes, life really just sucked…

…

…

A few days passed and all of us were released from the hospital. We returned to the Academy not long after that, where Sasuke now faced scrutiny from his own classmates—mostly boys who have been jealous of his academic prowess and popularity amongst his female classmates. It was during what should have been a typical lunchtime that a boy named Hibachi and his friends started pushing Sasuke around.

"You shouldn't bother to show your face after what your brother had done!" Hibachi said rather harshly as he pushed Sasuke onto the ground.

I was seconds away from beating down Hibachi with my fists, as I don't like it when people pick on my friends—especially if it's about touchy subjects. But Chōji stopped me, saying that Sasuke should be able to handle it. And dammit, I knew Chōji was right, but just…Hibachi is a dick. He's always picking on Naruto whenever he thinks none of us is looking and just…I really want to smash his face into the ground.

Hibachi usually refrained from picking on Sasuke, for fear of negative attention shifting on him for doing such a thing. Though, considering recent events and Sasuke was currently receiving mixed reception from his own classmates…Hibachi decided now was a good time as any to vent out his usual feelings of repressed jealousy toward Sasuke.

"Your brother is a traitor!" Hibachi taunted. "That makes you a traitor, too!"

"Traitor~! Traitor~!" Hibachi's friends started repeating in a typically childish derisive tone.

Sasuke scowled at Hibachi as he stood up. "Nii-san isn't a traitor…"

"Then what is he?" Hibachi asked, looking expectantly at Sasuke for an answer.

"A hero!" Sasuke exclaimed. "Naruto is still here because of him. If it wasn't for him, Naruto would be gone."

Hibachi arched his brow at Sasuke. "Eh? Really? Well, he should have stayed instead of letting trash like him stay. Unlike your brother, Naruto isn't worth keeping. It's all his fault we lost your brother. We're better off without him—Aaaaugh!"

Sasuke had just finished punching Hibachi directly in the face.

Crack!

There was a sickening crack that resounded upon Sasuke's fist coming in contact with Hibachi's nose. There was no doubt that Sasuke had broken Hibachi's nose—and he fucking deserved it for saying what he said. Sasuke was completely furious as, right after he had punched Hibachi in the face, he tackled the boy onto the ground and started punching him over and over again in the face.

We all watched, too shocked to do anything. It took only until Kiba could see the blood on Hibachi's face that he finally managed to force himself to run off so he could do his best to calm himself down, what with his hemophobia still troubling him. By then, five minutes had already passed and Hibachi's friends started trying to pull Sasuke off Hibachi, but to no avail. Sasuke was just too mad to allow himself to be removed, or let anyone get in his way.

It was Naruto who was able to successfully pull Sasuke off of Hibachi. Hibachi was practically unrecognizable. Blood and bruises covered his face and after Hibachi coughed a few times, he spat out a couple of bloody teeth. Hibachi's friends took this as a time to take Hibachi away from us, afraid that Sasuke might really kill him.

Once Hibachi and his friends were out of our sight, Sasuke finally managed to calm down. He was breathing heavily, his anger taking a while to subside. Once it had occurred to him what had happened, he latched onto Naruto and tried his best to keep himself from crying.

"I…don't blame you," Sasuke told Naruto. "I don't blame you at all. You're important…that's why Nii-san made sure to bring you back—even if it meant leaving. Just…don't let those idiots get you down."

It's honestly touching how Sasuke doesn't blame Naruto at all for the fact that Itachi is no longer in Konoha. It gave all of us a sense of relief and comfort, just knowing that nothing has really changed about how we feel about each other…except maybe Sasuke feeling strongly about how close he felt to Naruto. After all, apart from us, Naruto was all Sasuke had left of his life before his entire clan was killed, now that Itachi was gone.

Sasuke didn't get in much trouble for what he did to Hibachi, but he did get a warning. Sasuke didn't really care about it, though…and Hibachi couldn't really forget what Sasuke had done to him. Even after his injuries had been healed, Hibachi decided to get even with us.

…

The next week, during class, as Iruka-sensei was lecturing the class, I was trying my best to pay attention, even though I was nodding off. Sometimes, I had a hard time staying away during lectures and it was only because of Hinata's notes that I managed to get as far as I have done, academically. Unlike most times, the reason I was falling asleep was because nightmares have been keeping me up last night. Events regarding the day of what should have been Shisui's sixteenth birthday were hard to forget…

Just as I had effectively nodded off, I felt something cold and scaly brush my arm. I immediately woke up, my body tense and my eyes alert. When I found myself looking at a relatively harmless garter snake had somehow crawled into my sight, I let out an earsplitting scream. It was loud enough to bring all attention on me, thereby disrupting Iruka-sensei's lesson, but I couldn't care less about that, if only because there was a fucking snake right on my desk!

"Aaah-aaaaah-aaaaaaaaahhh—Getitawaygetitawaygetitaway!" For the love of god, just get it the fuck away from me!

It was Iruka-sensei who removed the garter snake from the classroom, as I stayed in the corner, crying my eyes out as my friends tried to calm me. It was Hibachi who had thought it would be funny to bring in a snake, having heard about our bad experience with snakes. Iruka-sensei punished Hibachi accordingly and sent me to the infirmary to recover.
I found out that day that my near-death experience with Orochimaru left me with a crippling fear of snakes. Because of that stupid snake bastard, I developed a phobia of snakes… There was nothing funny about this. Every time I looked at a snake now, all I could think about is the little snake that had been coiled around my neck and the giant snake that tried to crush me. It was difficult to forget—and it didn't help that it added more to the nightmares I've been having.

I never appreciated the irony that has inflicted my life and I still don't. I was honestly pissed off that I went from liking snakes in my past life to being terrified of them in this life. And it was all thanks to Orochimaru that had happened.

Even Kiba wasn't on my level in terms of how his phobia affected him. And, unlike my phobia of snakes, Kiba's hemophobia would get in the way of his potential career as a ninja. Not to say the same wouldn't happen to me, it was just that a phobia of blood was the worst thing to have when you're living the shinobi life. Snakes…they can be avoided. Blood cannot.

As I was discussing this with my friends on our way out of the Academy, now that classes were over, we neared the Academy tree swing. We usually took turns on the swings whenever something stressful has happened to us. And considering what had happened today, I needed the tree swing… However, it was already being occupied by a child close to our age.

Normally, we would have just gone our merry way to do something else, like going to an Akimichi clan restaurant or to Ichiraku Ramen. Then I got a closer look at the child on the tree swing. It was a boy with short, red hair, wearing clothes that were unlike typical Konohagakure wear and seemed more suited for a desert environment.

The boy eyed us with his sea-foam green eyes that were encircled with black eye-rings that reminded me of a raccoon. The boy lacked eyebrows and carried a gourd on his back. And on the left side of his forehead, was the kanji 爱, for love.

I honestly should have recognized him from the start, but it was just so unreal, seeing this kid here, of all places, at this time and day, years early before he was even supposed to be in Konohagakure.

And yet, there he was, in all his eight-year-old glory, Sabaku no Gaara.

Chapter End Notes

AND I MADE ANOTHER LONG CHAPTER. BEHOLD OVER 10000 WORDS! AAAAHH, it just feels so good to be able to write so much for this story. It's been a while since I wrote this much…

That aside, a lot of stuff happened in this chapter. For one thing, Orochimaru and Sasori, for another thing, Itachi left his village, and to top it all off, Chōko has ophidiophobia (fear of snakes). Course, I wouldn't blame Chōko for what she had to put up with, what with Orochimaru being his usual discomforting self. Definitely do NOT let around children.

So yeah, let me get into an explanation I should have made last chapter. The reason Itachi and Sasuke are alive is because they were at the summer festival with everyone else. Itachi's behavior of wanting to enjoy every little moment stems from the fact that he WAS supposed to kill his entire clan…but someone else got there before he did. And so, if you really think about it, it was all luck. That is pretty much the reason why Itachi
was being questioned and suspected, in case any of you guys were wondering.

Moving on from there, you guys do recall that Orochimaru used to be part of the Akatsuki. And that Sasori was his partner. Which is why the both of them were there. And the reason they were there in the first place was to recruit Itachi because, as mentioned before, as Itachi didn't leave his village, since he had no reason to, there was basically nothing keeping the Akatsuki out of Konoha.

And remember how I set the Chuunin exams in Amegakure? I kinda just found out (really, I just remembered) that the Akatsuki base is in Ame and just…considering what had happened in Ame, I'm pretty sure the Akatsuki would have seen Itachi in action and it is pretty difficult to ignore talent.

I'm honestly surprised with how well this turned out, even though I only picked out Amegakure because I live in California and we needed rain and, ironically enough, we started getting rain…a lot of it. AND IT IS FUCKING AWESOME.

And Sakura managed to create a name for herself at such a young age. AGAIN, I am quite happy with how Sakura is developing on her own. Only eight-years-old and she managed to help create an antidote to Sasori's poison, many years before she did it when Kankurō was poisoned. Course, she had help this time around, unlike in canon, where she did it on her own…but then again, she had more experience and Tsunade as a mentor, so there's that. At least she saved our favorite dog-masked ANBU from death.

Also, Naruto and Sasuke are as close as brothers are. That won't be changing anytime soon. Now that Itachi is gone, Naruto and Sasuke just have each other back home. Sasuke does face some mistreatment, considering what Itachi had done, but Sasuke doesn't blame Naruto. Sasuke is actually proud of what his brother had done. Itachi had sacrificed himself for Naruto…that's all Sasuke cares about and not what others say, which is that Itachi is a traitor.

By the by, Neji/Chōko is still the most supported pairing, with Shikamaru/Chōko in second, and with Naruto/Chōko being a recently introduced one. I know it's a bit too early for romance, but I have lots of time to build up chemistry. I just find it intriguing with what people think. Again, this is mostly something for me to keep in mind. As I said before, nothing is set in stone unless otherwise.

Also, I bet you guys didn't know that, after 12-24-14, I would have been writing for over six years already! That's a lot of time spent writing, but I really do enjoy what I do and I appreciate that people take the time to read my stories. Again, it really just means a lot to me, so thank you so much! ^^

I guess that's about it for this chapter. I hope you guys enjoyed it. Please excuse any mistake I might have made. This chapter was somewhat difficult to write, but I managed to get it done! So until next time, everyone!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gaara

I'm not exactly sure how long I stared at Gaara. All I know is that I soon found myself watching Naruto as he decided to introduce himself to Gaara.

"Are you from around here?" Naruto asked. "Because you sure don't look like it-ttebayo! Anyways, it's nice to meet you! I'm Uzumaki Naruto! What's your name?"

Gaara seemed rather surprised to have someone such as Naruto just approach him so suddenly. It was probably the first time anyone has ever done that to him. Which is why it wasn't a surprise that Gaara pushed Naruto away from himself.

Thud!

Naruto landed rear-first onto the ground. He yelped and rubbed at his backside, glaring at Gaara, who was no longer sitting on the swing. Gaara just stared back at Naruto, who just continued glaring at him.

"What the hell was that for, dattebayo?!" Naruto scowled. "I was just asking for your name—huh?!"

Gaara stared at Naruto for a moment and then turned his attention to us—the rest of his friends. I think we were honestly too shocked to say anything. We barely even knew this kid, even more so since it was obvious he wasn't from Konoha. It didn't help that Gaara had used his sand to push Naruto back. That was what mostly had our attention.

It's just so surreal seeing something, such as sand, just hovering around a little kid like Gaara. It was nothing we were accustomed to seeing and after our encounter with Orochimaru, that's definitely saying a lot.

"Do you…hate me?" Gaara finally spoke.

Naruto blinked. "Hate…? Why?"

This time, Gaara looked confused, not having expected such a response. He backed away from Naruto, who had finally stood up and was currently making eye contact with him. Naruto kept walking closer to Gaara, who continued backing away in response. Gaara yelped when he ended up bumping into the swing that had been behind him. Were it not for his sand, Gaara would have fallen back onto the ground.

As his sand helped him regain his balance, Gaara stared at Naruto, somewhat unnerved with how the blond continued to stare back without any hesitation whatsoever. This was probably the first time that someone had ever taken an interest in him in such a seemingly innocent manner.

"Your eyes," Naruto said. "I know those eyes."

If I recall, Gaara was six years old when he was lied to by Yashamaru about never being loved (which is a sack of horseshit). He's eight years old and, if I can even recall his birthday…he's older than Shino by a few days or so. Four days or so—go away, number four! You are a horrible number in this world.
Fuck off!

I mean Namikaze Minato was the Fourth Hokage and he ended up dying, and Gaara's father, Rasa, is the Fourth Kazekage and while he's not dead yet, he does eventually die… I just noticed that both Naruto and Gaara are quite similar in many ways and that's the most fucking obvious thing I have ever thought. Can you say, "No shit, Sherlock"?

That aside, I already brought up the fact we have at least four years left before graduation—which is when the Rookie 9 becomes a thing (give it some time—it'll happen). And that Shisui was supposed to turn sixteen this year (four times four—you can't get any worse than that). And guess what happened on that day? We lost Itachi to the Akatsuki because of shit that went on in the background. And if that wasn't enough, the Uchiha clan, one out of the FOUR Noble Clans of Konoha, ended up…yeah…

We lost everyone...

Really, the number four is just a horrible number in this world. I'm quite tired of it, actually…but I digress. I should be more concerned about the fact that Naruto was interacting with an unstable Gaara. This is pre-Chuunin exams Gaara, capable of killing people without a second thought. Cold, distant, and murderous—I have every reason to tell everyone to leave this kid alone. But I'm not—because I'm paying extremely close attention to how Naruto and Gaara interact.

And Naruto had just noticed some of the similarities between himself and Gaara. Of course, it's been years since Naruto has ever been alone, but memories as depressing as those are just so hard to forget...

No matter how much you try, you just can't never forget...

That's why Naruto doesn't want to leave Gaara alone—even though Gaara would very much like it if he were left alone.

"Those sad, lonely eyes," Naruto continued.

Gaara did not take too well to Naruto's comment and it showed when sand suddenly swarmed Naruto and forcefully flung him into a nearby wall. Had it not been for our little friend in the shadows showing up when he did, Naruto would have slammed into the wall. The dog-masked ANBU caught Naruto before he hit the wall and then gently set him down before dashing off to prevent Sasuke from attacking Gaara.

God dammit, Sasuke—do you have a death wish, little boy?!

The attack would have been rendered useless, what with Gaara being protected by his sand—which is why Sasuke shouldn't even try to lay a finger on this boy! Luckily, our little friend in the shadows decided not to take any chances with Sasuke, should Gaara's sand take it a step further and hurt him in the process of shielding Gaara. The dog-masked ANBU—Hound, I believe his name was, from what I heard at the hospital—tried to talk some much needed sense into Sasuke. As this went on, Neji, Hinata, Shikamaru, Chōji, Shino, and Kiba ran to Naruto's side—all of them very much concerned about their friend's well-being. After what happened recently, can you really blame them for being so overprotective of Naruto?

We've been through too much to take any more chances!

Meanwhile with me, I stayed behind and focused all of my attention on Gaara, who was now observing the scene before him. There was something about the sight of Naruto being fussed over by
his friends that just caught Gaara's attention. Initially, I was rather mad that someone would even dare to try and hurt my friend (it is seriously too fucking soon for this!). But then—for a brief moment—I managed to catch a glimpse at the longing and pain within Gaara's eyes.

Lonelylonelylonelylonely...

I thought he would have already discarded any desires for friendship by now…but I guess two years isn't enough to completely smother it. Just like Neji during the Kagome Kagome incident, Gaara was still just a child…and time was something that still existed for him.

Swallowing hard, I approached Gaara, with no one there to stop me, as Hound was still too busy lecturing Sasuke and Naruto was occupied with laughing off his friends' concerns in an attempt to ease their worries. Gaara was still distracted with watching Naruto that it was only until his sand had caused me to trip that his attention finally shifted over to me.

Thud!

Ow…I do not appreciate being tripped—especially if it causes my glasses to fall off my face! The only reason I haven't invested in eyewear that would negate such a problem, as I have been suggested to many times by Iruka, is because I need to be able to take my glasses off with ease—for my shurikenjutsu.

The convenience makes a difference!

And I honestly don't feel like replacing these glasses! I've managed with them so far, after all—anoyances and all. It'd be a waste to change that now and I'm totally getting off topic! I should be focusing on finding my glasses because talking to Gaara when he appears to me as nothing but a bit of a red blur is not exactly something I wish to do—especially when I'm this close to him!

As I fumbled around the ground for my glasses, I felt grains of sand move and soon, my hand came across the familiar frame of my circular glasses. I picked them up and placed them on my face before focusing my gaze on Gaara. He no longer seemed so cold and distance—rather, he actually seemed nervous.

Hello?

Gaara struggled to find his voice as I got off the ground and dusted the dirt off my clothes. I was a little surprised to see that I was slightly taller than Gaara…slightly. I wasn't exactly the tallest person in my circle of friends. Even Hinata, who was also quite short herself, had a couple of more centimeters on herself in comparison to me. And Naruto…Naruto was actually amongst the tallest of our group, as a result of the proper nutrition he has received from eating Akimichi clan food. Who knew that his short height had just been a result of a poor nutrition?

Actually, that makes sense and I'm seriously glad I got to Naruto when I did.

I remembered that Gaara had been born prematurely—which could have had a hand in his slightly smaller stature. The more I stared at Gaara, the more he struggled to say something. He was not used to being stared at like this and it really showed. He honestly reminded me of…well, me. So I decided to help him out and took the initiative in breaking the ice between us.

"Eat?" I still wasn't good at talking to people that I barely knew and it was a bit of a nervous habit of mine to resort to saying, between two words, "eat" or "food", in situations such as these.

But, to my complete surprise, Gaara nodded his head and followed me as I walked him over to Naruto and the others. Everyone had been silent when they saw me with Gaara and when Sasuke
rushed over to Naruto and shielded him from Gaara's sight, Gaara finally spoke and told us his name.

"I'm Suna no Gaara," is what he told us and, from there, after a brief introduction from the rest of us, he came along with us as we went into town.

Sasuke was still wary of Gaara, Naruto was trying to get close to Gaara, and Gaara was just overtly cautious of his position. He was willing to take his chances, but at the same time, he was completely on edge. It took me a while to realize that no one in Konoha would know anything about Gaara—of what he is and what he is capable of. So with no one looking at him as though he was a monster, Gaara had found an opening. And his overtly cautious behavior was an insecurity that we would eventually find out and leave him.

_He doesn't want us to abandon him..._

The more I think about it, the more I realize that Gaara is lying to us through omission by depriving us of what may as well be crucial information about himself. I know this kid has killed—even more so than we'll probably ever kill within our shinobi career (that hasn't start yet for any of us—Gaara included). My thoughts are starting to hit morbid territory. At the same time, the realization of why Gaara was doing this was just so sad.

_He still has some hope left in him..._

Just when Gaara had given up all desire for friendship, he receives an opening in the form of an unexpected visit to Konohagakure, where he is amongst people who know nothing of his past. The one moment he puts aside the intent to kill in order to prove his own existence and to gain recognition from his own village and it's just to make friends (I'm assuming that's his intent from our interactions). Again, it's just sad.

_So very, very sad..._

It just got even sadder when I noticed that Gaara had seen the stares that Naruto was receiving from the owners of the convenience store we were visiting.

_He knows those looks..._

God dammit, I'm not supposed to be having feels—go away, tears!

"Are you c-crying, Chôko-chan?" Hinata suddenly asked me.

"N-No—I just got something in my eye!" I said…you know, like a liar as I took off my glasses in order to rub my eyes. "Can we talk about this some other time?"

I'd rather not do it here, where we could potentially cause a scene.

"Aww, is leader worrying about something?" Kiba asked as he plopped himself onto my back, with his head propped on top of mine—because Kiba has no sense of personal space and likes to remind me of how short I am.

By the by, somehow...I am still leader. I don't know why, but everyone refused to hear me out when I told them I wasn't fit to be leader. Despite my reckless actions during our confrontation with Orochimaru and Sasori, my friends still trust me and just...it's touching, really. I do recall crying when they told me that at the hospital. Because I am still emotional as ever, and that might be something that won't ever change about me—no matter how hard I try.

…
"So why is it that you were crying?" Shino asked me, moments after we had all left the convenience store.

"I just don't like how people keep staring at Naruto like that." Technically, I'm not lying, since I really hate the way Naruto is treated (which is still a hell of a lot better than it had been before I had befriended him and the circle of friends became a thing—which honestly says a lot). And my friends know how much I get worked up over something such as that, so everyone just chalked it up as Chōko being Chōko.

Since I had brought it up, Gaara decided to ask Naruto, "Why do they stare at you?"

His question had caught Naruto off-guard. It's probably been a good while since Naruto last even thought about that—he has us, after all.

"I don't know," was all Naruto could even say. "But I don't care—I'm not alone! Right, Chōko-chan?"

"That's right!" My response was almost automatic, yet reassuring to Naruto, who just smiled widely.

"And you're not alone, too, Gaara!" Naruto's words garnered a rather shocked reaction from Gaara, who had dropped the huge bag of snacks he had bought for himself at the convenience store.

"I'm not…alone…" Gaara repeated Naruto's words.

Naruto nodded his head and proceeded to pick up Gaara's scattered snacks off the ground. "That's right—you have us!"

As if to make a point, the rest of us started helping Naruto with picking up Gaara's snacks off the ground. Only Sasuke refrained from doing so, his gaze still on Gaara, who just stared back. It was probably difficult for Sasuke to forget the fact that Gaara had flung Naruto into a wall…but after seeing how accepting Naruto was, Sasuke decided to stop holding a grudge and started helping the rest of us out.

And Gaara just continued to stare at us, not knowing how to react. Unlike Naruto, Gaara managed to stay calm and composed, but he did seem content.

... 

Afterwards, we visited an Akimichi clan restaurant, where all of us took the time to get to know Gaara. Shikamaru was straight to the point, asking Gaara why someone from Sunagakure was doing in Konohagakure.

"My father is here for some business with your Hokage," Gaara explained calmly. "I don't know the details, but…did something happen here?"

I grimaced. "Yeah, about nearly two weeks ago—we don't like to talk about it."

I mean, we lost Itachi, Orochimaru tried to kill me, Hound got poisoned by Sasori—the list goes on. It was psychologically traumatizing and will likely haunt us for the rest of our lives in the form of nightmares. Speaking of Sasori, I'm starting to connect the dots. It's because of his appearance in Konohagakure (with Orochimaru) that brought the Kazekage here for business with the Hokage. And I doubt Rasa would risk leaving Gaara behind in Sunagakure, so that would explain why Gaara is even here in the first place.

Could be...or maybe it's something else?
I wouldn't know, since there's only so much I can do on my own when it comes to figuring these things out. That aside, this is one hell of a domino effect—like holy fuck! I should be concerned, but I'm not.

Bluh, I'll worry about that some other time...

"So who's your father?" Naruto asked after he finished off his seventh bowl of udon.

Gaara blinked a few times and nodded his head. "He's the Kazekage."

Naruto was a little confused as to what Gaara meant until Shikamaru explained it all. Afterwards, Naruto looked ecstatically at Gaara. "Really?! That's awesome!"

"Not really..." Gaara replied as he picked at his food with his chopsticks. He was eating salted tongue and gizzard, by the way. I'm honestly surprised my clan's restaurants even serve this type of food, but eh, you learn something new every day. I'm quite partial to tongue, anyways—I grew up in a typical Mexican family in my past life. There are a lot of things I have eaten or seen eaten that I don't even question. So I'm quite open-minded about food...for the most part. I still do have my moments, but it's more of me reacting in a way to finding out that it can be eaten and—ooh, my tonkatsu is here!

"Isn't that your fifth plate?" Why yes, Gaara, it is.

"Isn't that your fifth plate, too?" Two can play at that game.

"Sixth, actually." Damn, I suck at counting sometimes!

"You guys eat a lot." Well, no shit, Kiba, you're looking at two jinchuuriki and a girl with a fast-metabolism. Oh wait, only some of that information isn't classified—never mind!

Now I feel stupid...good thing I didn't say anything! I'm just gonna eat now before I do...Om nom nom...

"Slow down, Chōko-san," Neji tried to warn me. "You don't want to choke."

I stopped chewing and stared at Neji for a moment. Ever since the incident on Shisui's birthday, Neji has been quite overprotective of me. Well, to be fair, everyone has been, with Sasuke, Shikamaru, and Neji being the most prominent of the bunch—they watched as Orochimaru broke my ankle. I think that's enough reason to worry about me.

There's also the fact that I seem to have a death wish myself, no thanks to my tendency to be so freaking impulsive.

Shikamaru certainly worries a lot when I say something without thinking. Which is why the jerk has been using his Kagemane on me to shut me up. It gives him practice and it keeps me out of trouble. I still don't appreciate it because he keeps doing it without warning me!

Not cool, dude!

And let me tell you about the Kagemane—it feels weird. It's as if someone or something is touching your entire body and moving you like a puppet—except no one is there. It's kinda creepy the more I think about it and I should stop getting distracted and focus on the fact that Gaara wants to ask me a question.

"What is it, Gaara?" I'm glad I didn't blurt that out.
"Are you and Chōji siblings?" Gaara asked as he looked at Chōji and me, most likely finding similarities in our facial markings and the fact that we wore the same clothes.

"Yeah...we're fraternal twins," I replied. "Chōji's older than me by thirteen minutes though—say, do you have any siblings?"

Gaara blinked and looked down. "..."

Oh crap—I hope I didn't bring up a touchy subject. I know Temari and Kankurō aren't exactly the closest to Gaara in this current day and age.

"Two of them," Gaara suddenly said, catching me off-guard. "A brother and a sister, both older than me...we're not that close."

"Eeeeh?" Naruto looked perplexed. "You're not?"

Gaara shook his head. "They're...busy."

More like they're not allowed to interact with you and you might have scared the shit out of them with death threats—but details.

"Ah, I see..." Naruto seemed to understand. "Say...do you want to see our brother, Shisui?"

Gaara tilted his head to the side. "Brother?"

Naruto grinned widely. "Yeah! What do you say, leader?"

"Well, I don't mind paying Shisui a visit." So long as Hound is following us, then I'm fine going to Naruto's house...the paranoia is hard to ignore.

...

...

I'm pretty sure Gaara was confused when we took him out into the backyard, where Shisui's tree was growing. He was expecting a person...and when Naruto gestured at the tree and introduced it as Shisui, Gaara stared at the tree for a good three minutes.

"It's a tree," was all he said.

Tch, yeah, it's a tree—a magnolia, to be precise! And it sure is growing healthy and fast. Must be the Yamanaka touch...speaking of Yamanaka, I wonder how Ino is doing at Yamanaka Flowers...Probably bored, as usual. Maybe we should do her a favor and sneak her out—that sounds like a good idea and I am such a bad influence.

"It might be a tree, but it's also Shisui-nii!" Naruto explained to Gaara. "I read somewhere that if you want to keep a soul in this world, then you plant a tree over their grave! And because we planted this tree over his ashes, it absorbed Shisui-nii's soul and keeps him here with us-ttebayo!"

"...So the actual Shisui is dead?" That's all Gaara seemed to have gathered from Naruto's explanation.

Naruto pouted. "He's not dead! That's Shisui-nii right there, looking over all of us, dattebayo!"

"And one isn't truly dead until they are forgotten," Shino brought up. "That is what Shisui-san told us."
"And I doubt we'll ever forget a guy like him," Kiba remarked. "Thanks to him, Hanabi keeps calling me, Nana."

It's funny how that happened, because, up until then, Hanabi usually referred to Kiba as, "Kiki." Even though Hanabi is two years old and getting better and better at talking every day, when it comes to names, she hasn't really changed. I swear she's doing it deliberately. Of course, I don't have anything to really care about because I get called Chōchō, Hinata is Nee, Neji is Nii, Shino is Nono, Shikamaru is Shika, Chōji is just Chō, and Itachi was Chichi…it's as funny as it sounds.

It was even funnier for me because of two reasons. Whenever Hanabi called Itachi, "Chichi", I kept thinking of Chi-Chi from the *Dragon Ball* series. Then my immaturity kicked in and reminded me of what I usually associated the term with—that being a certain slang term in Mexican Spanish that I grew up knowing, because past mom was like that. She is what I would refer to as a traditional Mexican mother…for various reasons.

*People joke about la chancla, but it's fucking real!*

Now that Itachi is gone, any sense of humor there was with the nickname disappeared. Because Hanabi keeps asking us, "Where's Chichi?"

We have yet to tell her and just…it's complicated. Because if there's one thing I know about Hanabi, it's that milk and bananas are her favorite food. I've also learned a lot of things from the *Dragon Ball* series, and that is that Chi-Chi's name is based on the word "Milk" in Japanese. I am aware that there are other meanings, but they are irrelevant because Hanabi deliberately calls Itachi, "Chichi" because of the word, "milk."

You would not believe how much hell Shisui gave Itachi when he made that connection. That was where most of the humor came from, because Itachi went from "weasel" to "milk" within a matter of seconds, thanks to Hanabi. Of course, it was also Shisui who pointed out that Hanabi was associating Itachi with something she loves—that being, milk, so, in hindsight, it was a rather affectionate nickname. Which is why we have yet to tell her anything about Itachi's departure, because it would devastate her.

A two-year-old, like Hanabi, doesn't need that.

*Not after all that has happened...*

"Is this Shisui...someone who loved you?" And I don't need the feels that come from analyzing Gaara's situation! Uugh, he's probably trying to see if there are any more similarities between him and Naruto—holy shit, there *is* another similarity and that is just *scary.*

Shisui is basically to Naruto what Yashamaru is to Gaara—minus the lies and deceit. That is just... I *need* a moment.

"Shisui loved all of us," Sasuke decided to answer Gaara's question. "But he was the closest to Naruto...like brothers."

"Aren't you his brother?" Where the heck did you get that question from, Gaara? Wait, wasn't there this whole reincarnation bullshit that made Naruto and Sasuke technically brothers...?

... Well, I need another moment.

*Nice to see that I'm not the only one dealing with some sort of reincarnation bullshit...*
"He's not my brother," Naruto was quick to say. "I mean…Sasuke?"

Sasuke has a certain look on his face, almost as if he had just recently made a connection and— "Not blood-related, at least—but yeah, we're brothers."

Well, looks like Sasuke is taken with the idea of him and Naruto being brothers. That's…adorable.

"I'm not calling you Nii-san, if that's what you want." Naruto's not denying it!

"I won't leave you, if that's what you're worried about." I think that settles it.

"What happened?" Aaaand Gaara unintentionally ruined the moment.

"People die—that's what happened." Sorry if I sound a little blunt and insensitive—that is totally not my intent. I just…rather not talk about it. "Sorry…"

"Are you having n-nightmares again?" Hinata asked me.

"She was falling asleep in class," Shikamaru remarked as he turned his head to Chōji.

Chōji, don't you fucking say anything— "She had a nightmare about that snake guy again."

"Chōji!" I whined. "You said you wouldn't tell!"

"I wasn't…but then I saw you freak out when you saw a snake." Let it be known that Chōji was the overprotective older brother when he wanted to be.

"Stupid Hibachi," Naruto spat. "He's probably going to start picking on you, since you got him in a lot of trouble."

"Well, excuse me for having a snake phobia!" As if I could even control something like that! "I didn't even know I had one until today!"

Uugh, I'm getting goosebumps from even thinking about that snake! Fucking Hibachi—I hope he steps on Legos! Wait…Legos don't exist in this world.

…

Dammit, there goes me ever using that when I'm pissed off at someone! Now I'm pouting…that's the most appropriate term I could use, because I look and feel like a child not getting their way. Okay, who's hugging me?!

"Sorry…you look like you needed one," Neji says after I tensed up. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No—I'm good with this." Hugs are nice…and speaking of hugs, Gaara looks like he also needs one. "Do you need a hug, Gaara?"

"What?" That definitely caught Gaara by surprised. I think it's safe to say that Gaara has never been asked that and—dammit, feels, go away!

"Chōko-chan asked if you want a hug," Naruto repeated. "Do you?"

Gaara clutched his head, almost as if he had been in pain. "Guh…"

"Is something wrong-ttebayo?" Naruto looked questioningly at Gaara. When Naruto took a step toward Gaara, Gaara backed away and yelled, "Stay away!"
I really didn't like the sound of that. While Gaara has managed to stay calm, so far, he still was rather unstable. Of course, only I knew that and when I saw Naruto walking closer to Gaara, purposely ignoring Gaara as he yelled at Naruto to stay away, out of concern for someone he barely even knew and probably considered a friend already…a surge of panic overtook my body.

I pulled myself out of Neji's embrace and ran towards Naruto. I could already feel my heart beginning to race as I thought about all the possible scenarios that could play out at this current moment. I should have known that what went up would eventually come down.

Gaara's attempts at integrating himself within our circle of friends were no different. It was only natural that Gaara would come across a bump in the road: His inability to comprehend genuine compassion after the traumatizing experience of being betrayed.

Even if it was a lie, Gaara didn't know that and Yashamaru ruined any possible chances of Gaara accepting the fact that people are capable of caring for him. Two years isn't a lot, but trust is something that is difficult to fix once broken. Like paper crumpled up and smoothed out afterwards. It'll never be the same again.

Naruto means well, but sometimes, his actions were like mine—done without regard of any consequences. While I had a knack at getting myself into trouble because of it, I'd rather not let the same happen to any of my friends. As I pushed Naruto out of the way from the wave of sand that had meant to hit him, instead of me, I realized something.

This is why my friends still trust me.

Because I care.

I care so much.

So very, very much...

As I lay on the ground, the impact of Gaara's attack having knocked me down, I find myself smiling upon hearing my friends call my name out of concern. I was hurt. Not too seriously, but still hurt…the pain was evident, as were the grains of sand that were still on me. I should be scared—and I am—but seeing my friends rush to my side was quite reassuring.

And I realized something else. This life—as complicated and frustrating as it was at times—wasn't so bad. Even if I did leave many people behind in my past life…even if it was quite the horrifying experience to live in a world, where child soldiers were the norm (because hey, that's what the shinobi life entails)...even if it meant experiencing the shitstorm the future was…I still don't mind.

Because I'm not alone.

It just took me this long to finally realize that myself...

...

Hound might have reacted a tad bit too late, but he was still there to protect us from Gaara, who was struggling to control whatever it was that was conflicting him—Shukaku, most likely. I have long since suspected Hound's identity from the day I first saw his mask. It only made sense as to why he would be tasked in watching over Naruto, who carried the Kyuubi inside of him.

It became painfully obvious when Gaara slowly began to calm down the longer he stared at Hound. And the silver hair was a dead giveaway to begin with, despite the fact that I have seen other inhabitants of this village who possessed the same hair color. The same hairstyle, on the other hand
I still like to pretend that Hound’s identity was still a mystery to me. It was all the more fun to play along, when the others start speculating what is under the mask. I once suggested another mask as a joke, to which Naruto quickly shot down because of how redundant it was. It was funny…because my joke held truth to it. It's nice enjoying irony in its harmless and humorous form.

Eventually, Gaara regained control of himself and stared in horror at the damage his instability had caused. He looked at every one of us, his gaze soon falling upon me. This was probably the first time in years (two, at least) that he had felt guilt about hurting someone. It was probably also confusing, because, up until today, Gaara had probably grown accustomed to killing people without hesitation. Then Gaara was approached by Naruto and I guess that's what threw him off.

Because Naruto had that effect on people.

Speaking of Naruto, he was struggling to understand the situation. When he had barely uttered Gaara’s name, Gaara couldn't handle it anymore and ran off into Naruto’s house. Naruto called out to Gaara before following him into the house, with Sasuke following him in, moments afterwards.

Hound sighed at the scene of events he had witness before looking back to check up on me. When he confirmed that I wasn't dying, Hound took off into the house, leaving the rest of us behind. By now, I was growing tired of laying on the ground and started to sit up. I struggled at first…then Kiba, the last person I would ever expect, held out his hand to help me.

Even now, Kiba is trying his hardest not to retch as he helped me stand up. It must have been complete torture for him to be around me, while I'm bleeding. The lengths people will go for those they care for is amazing. I just hope Kiba isn't straining himself.

Hinata tried to help Kiba out by covering his nose with a handkerchief she carried on herself. It helped a little, but not enough. Despite this, Kiba was thankful and when Shino pushed Kiba aside to take over, allowing the Inuzuka a chance to distance himself from the scent of blood, Kiba ran off to the farthest corner of the backyard and threw up in a couple of bushes.

I should focus on the current situation, but honestly, these Team 8 interactions are quite endearing to the point that they are quite distracting. Shikamaru and Chōji brought my attention back to the fact that I was injured, with Neji offering to carry me to the hospital. I didn't get a chance to say anything because Shikamaru used his Kagemane on me to keep me still while Chōji picked me up and set me on Neji's back.

"I wasn't going to say no…" was the first thing I said when Shikamaru relinquished his hold on me. "And stop doing that! You're going to exhaust yourself!"

Did you not learn anything from our encounter with Orochimaru and Sasori?!

"Go back to being a baby sloth—you're starting to worry me!"

"I'm not risking anything around you, leader," Shikamaru remarked. "You're more trouble than you're worth sometimes."

"I guess you can say I'm troublesome." I grinned at Shikamaru he just stared at me.

"That was a bad, Chōko." I know, Chōji…I know.
It's rather difficult working with young Gaara, especially since this is post-Yashamaru. Then again, in canon, Gaara never did leave Sunagakure at such a young age and met Naruto. And Chōko already made the connection as to why Gaara would even be in Konohagakure. Basically, you have Sasori to thank for Gaara's appearance. Because I doubt Hiruzen would ignore the fact that missing-nin from Suna infiltrated Konoha, alongside Orochimaru.

Seriously, that is quite the domino effect that basically starts with Itachi never leaving his village, because of the Uchiha Clan Massacre. And let me just say, it doesn't end there. There is still more to come.

That aside, Sasuke and Naruto consider each other brothers and I consider that an accomplishment. And if there's one thing I learned from ChibiFoxAI, there's this connection between Naruto and Sasuke involving them being the reincarnations of Kaguya's sons. I seriously need to sit down one of these days and just binge-read Naruto. Knowing me, I'll binge-read another part of Jojo's Bizarre Adventure before that happens.

Chōko is still emotional as ever, with a protective side to her, as shown by how she took a hit for Naruto. Gaara is trying to take advantage of his situation in Konoha, but failing because Shukaku is still a thing and basically, Gaara is conflicted. The poor kid can't get a break. It's not always easy being a jinchuuriki.

Especially since Naruto can't fully sympathize just yet, because he isn't aware of his jinchuuriki status, like Gaara. And if anyone is wondering about the whole Mexican Spanish slang thing Chōko associates Itachi's nickname, "Chi-chi", it's because it can mean breasts. Again, Chōko is immature sometimes—she has established that.

And yes, I am Mexican. I make jokes about it with my friends, mostly in good humor since most of my friends are also Mexican (basically our way of relating to each other). We usually go on about the stuff we eat, like nopales (cactus), chicharrón (fried pork skin), and tongue, and also relate when it comes to our families (our mothers, most prominently)—especially when we're playing Cards Against Humanity (we are horrible people).

That's enough about me. Also, in regards to Chōko's nickname from Hanabi, I couldn't help but think of Chōji's kid, Chōchō, from the last chapter. And let me just say, I still have questions in regards to how Chōji and Karui ended up together, but god damn, is their kid beautiful. Like, damn, good genes right there. I'm just... Chōchō is precious to me. As are the other children—they're beautiful, dammit! I don't know about you guys, but a lot of my OTPs ended up being canon and just... yeah... I needed a moment when I heard.

Also, I think it should be fairly obvious who Hound is by now. So nineteen chapters, huh? Yeah, I feel accomplished. I'm gonna hit that milestone soon, that being me getting this story past twenty chapters. It's been a slow run so far, but I smell a time skip coming sometime in the future. So watch out.

And Neji/Chōko is still in the lead, Shikamaru/Chōko in second, and Naruto/Chōko has been getting a lot of support as of recently, like wow. They're still young, so it won't really take effect until they're older, but again, it's something to keep in mind. I am also
aware that Ino has had the least interactions in this story and I'll try to fix that.

So I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, because I sure did! A lot of you guys were pretty happy with Gaara, so I hope I didn't botch anything up with this chapter. So that's it for now, until next time everyone!
I was not looking forward to Chōza and Ageha's reactions when (or rather, if) they find out what happened today. I'm still trying my best to prepare myself when they learn of my ophidiophobia (phobia of snakes). Orochimaru is already on my father's kill-list (Fun Fact: Chōza now has a kill-list because of that snake bastard) and has earned the hatred of the Akimichi clan. The Akimichi clan is, by far, one of the nicest clans around in Konoha. They are also the most influential, in terms of connections. Pissing them off is a sign you fucked up majorly...because, aside from the Akimichi clan itself, you also had to deal with the Nara and the Yamanaka.

The Yamanaka clan isn't just known for being experts in intelligence gathering and espionage. They're quite the cultivators, too. They're well known amongst the agricultural community in Konoha for providing the seeds for many of the crops grown by farmers. Ino's maternal grandparents happened to farmers who have used Yamanaka-cultivated seeds. And the flower shop the Yamanaka clan runs isn't just for aesthetics. It's a resource for medicinal herbs and poison, of which are used by a number of consumers. It is also the only resource, in terms of convenience, for such.

The Nara clan is known for their intelligence and their skills in the area of medicine. The medical encyclopedia the clan possesses is no fucking joke. It's huge, it's detailed, and good god, was it heavy! I think it could give Colonel Sassacre's Daunting Text of Magical Frivolity and Practical Japery a run for its money—hell, it could probably kill a cat as well, with the weight it packed!

Gratuitous Homestuck references aside, that medical encyclopedia was crucial to the hospital. I believe Shikamaru mentioned that a number of his relatives held positions at the hospital as medic-nin.

The Akimichi clan's connections have grown only stronger with the inclusion of the Aburame, Hyuuga, and Uchiha clans. And even without the Uchiha clan, there's the Sarutobi clan, who has long been affiliated with the Yamanaka, Nara, and Akimichi clans, as a result of a tradition involving the Ino-Shika-Chō trio. And, slowly, but surely, the Inuzuka clan is close to becoming yet another of my clan's connections, as a result of the friendship Kiba had with Chōji and I.

Loyalty in the Inuzuka clan works the same way it works for their canine companions: it is earned, not given. And once earned, they will never leave your side. It's honestly an endearing trait amongst the clan, but I digress.

Back to my main point, when Orochimaru decided to break my ankle and give me my first near-death experience, he fucked up. He fucked up so hard, he no longer has a place in Konohagakure—not that he had one in the first place, after what he had done. But still, disregarding his past actions, what he had done to me basically would have screwed him over had he been any other person.

For that exact same reason, I was extremely concerned about anyone learning about what had happened earlier. Even though it was an accident, misconceptions happen and lacking communication of the dangerous kind was still a thing. So I'd rather Gaara not get in any trouble, considering the fact that my father created a kill-list in reaction to learning about someone harming
and nearly killing his only daughter (*moi*)…because it could create potential tension.

Think about it this way…the Kazekage's son harmed the daughter belonging to one of the Four Noble Clans of Konohagakure—specifically, the head of the Akimichi clan. And considering the aforementioned fact that the Akimichi clan has connections…yeah, it really doesn't look so good…

Also, Danzō…I'm honestly surprised I've forgotten about him, but eh, I haven't encountered him yet (THANK GOD) and I don't plan on doing so, unless he is either on his deathbed or something of the similar variety (I want that bastard dead!). So if I want to avoid having an early encounter with Danzō, as I have with everyone else, the incident of Gaara HAS to stay a secret. Because Danzō, while having good intentions (to the extreme, unfortunately), is highly likely to react negatively to the idea of someone putting his village's safety at risk…which is what Gaara could potentially do, being a rather unstable jinchuuriki.

So as I sit in a chair within a hospital room, with my friends waiting outside, as the medic-nin in front of me heals my wounds, I am quite relieved at the fact that my medic-nin is not a Nara. Because a Nara would have immediately contacted my parents, as they had done when I was brought in with the others after our encounter with Orochimaru and Sasori. The Nara clan, in regards to those working at the hospital, has been keeping a close eye on me over the years.

I have my fast metabolism to blame for that, because here's the thing about the Akimichi clan that I have only recently learned during my stay at the hospital while I was healing. And what I learned was quite intriguing because I was right when I said that my fast metabolism wouldn't have been much of a problem if I were born to anyone else outside of the Akimichi clan. The ability to convert calories into chakra isn't just something that could be taught and learned…it's also genetic.

Hiden techniques can be taught to anyone—that's what separates it from a kekkei genkai. *However*, hiden techniques have its limitations in that they can only be used to their full potential to those who carry a genetic predisposition that coincides with a specific hiden technique. In the Akimichi clan’s case, members born into the clan carry a genetic predisposition to convert calories into chakra from the day they are born.

The conversion is moderate, so it isn't of much note on its own. When paired up with the hiden technique that gives the user the ability to manually convert calories into chakra (which still involves the manipulation of one energy into another), it makes a huge difference as it amplifies the amount of chakra produced in a sitting. Now when you introduce my fast metabolism into the mix, it creates an imbalance that basically results in *why* I have such a smaller build in comparison to Chōji.

*This shit basically fucked up my body!*

It took me like five years to finally learn the entire explanation of my fast metabolism…and it was because I was bored (I'm not joking, I asked Taeko, Shikamaru's paternal aunt, about my metabolism out of boredom). It definitely explained why Chōza was so adamant at making me swear to not use the hiden technique to convert calories into chakra unless it was an emergency, at which it was to be used as a last resort…kinda like the Three Colored Pills, except without the life-threatening risk of dying…I think? I don't know…all I know is that the Nara working at the hospital are still in the process of figuring out how my situation came to be. As a result, they have kept a close eye on me for various reasons—such as research and actual concern.

*It really says a lot when I happen to be the first of my specific case to exist.*

Since my medic-nin is not a Nara, thus easing some of my concerns, Gaara shifted back into my focus as my thoughts now centered on the current situation. Naruto is still looking for Gaara (most likely), Sasuke and Hound are still chasing after Naruto, and I'm over here, dealing with Fuki's
father, Suzuki Fuyuki.

Suzuki Fuki…Suzuki Fuyuki…okay, there is definitely a theme going on with their names and surnames. What's Fuki's mother's name again…? Wasn't it Ruki…? Ehh, not the point—anyways, Fuyuki was quite the stern person when he wanted to be, scolding me for getting myself into trouble. He certainly means well, though I can see the issues that Fuki would have with it.

"Twice in a month is something that should happen when you are a full-fledged shinobi—not an Academy Student!" Did I mention that just about everyone working at the hospital knows me as the girl who nearly got killed by Orochimaru? Apparently, the fact that I punched Orochimaru in the crotch is going over their head, but I guess the paranoia over the fact that two S-ranked missing-nin infiltrated Konoha in broad daylight is hard to ignore. I mean, Hound almost died from Sasori's poison.

Again, it's a pretty traumatizing experience, and I guess Fuyuki sees his daughter in me. I'd be scared too if I was in Fuyuki's shoes. And he is right, I mean…stuff like that shouldn't happen until after I become a Genin. Of course, then life decided to throw a curveball at me and remind me what it meant to be friends with the main protagonist—that being that any chance of a normal life was a mere illusion.

"You're not going to tell my parents about this, are you?" Can it at least wait until after they learn about the snake phobia?

Fuyuki stared at me for a moment and sighed in defeat. "Your wounds weren't that serious, anyway…but I swear, if I see you in here again before the month ends, I'm telling your parents about today's visit. Understand?"

"You don't have to tell me twice!" The month is just about over anyways, so I just have to make sure I don't end up getting hurt enough to warrant a hospital visit within the next few days…I still can't believe Fuyuki believed my lie about me falling from a tree…because like hell I was going to bring up Gaara! I even had everyone look me over for sand before I let myself be taken inside the hospital. I had to break free of Shikamaru's Kagemane for it, which is a lot harder than it looks.

Once Fuyuki finished healing me and gave me a look over, he allowed me to leave. Kiba immediately tackled me upon sight as soon as I left the room.

"Leader!" Kiba exclaimed before promptly realizing that I still smelled like blood and dropping me like a hot tamale afterward to rush off to the nearest trashcan or restroom.

I sighed as I watched the Inuzuka run off, feeling a little awkward because my clothes were still stained with my blood. The same could be said about Neji, but he didn't seem to care. Though, considering that Kiba still had an aversion to the scent of blood and I wasn't exactly in the cleanest of states…I think it would be a good idea to clean up and change out of these clothes.

"You want me to sneak back home and grab you some clean clothes?" Chôji was quick to offer when I suggested making a trip to the bathhouse to clean up.

"Wh-What about Neji-nii-sama?" Hinata looked questioningly at her cousin.

"I believe he needs a bath as well," Shino suggested. "For Kiba-kun's sake, I mean."

"Even if it is just a little blood, Kiba still doesn't take too well to it." Shikamaru nodded. "How troublesome…"

"Well, what are you gonna do?" It's not Kiba's fault he has a sensitive nose. "Besides, I don't want
anyone learning about what happened with Gaara. We need to get rid of all the evidence."

"Evidence?" Neji arched his brow at me.

"All of the evidence!" I reiterated. "All of it!"

"I feel as if there is a joke within your remark, but I can't seem to catch on," Shikamaru remarked.

Oh, if only you knew… "To the bathhouse!"

"We s-still have to wait for Kiba-kun!" Hinata exclaimed.

I stared at Hinata for a moment and felt my face heat up when I realized…she was right. "Almost left someone behind…"

Even though we were just talking about Kiba, I managed to forget about him. How embarrassing…

"There, there," Shino said as he patted me reassuringly on the back.

I couldn't help but find this situation ironic, because Shino, in canon, seemed to always be left out in some way. Now he's the one trying to make me feel better for almost leaving someone out (that wasn't him). Ugh, I need a moment…

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…

So, the bathhouse…everything seemed fine and dandy at the time, and Hinata decided to join me, so I wasn't on my own (I really appreciate it). The guys did the same with Neji, who was already reluctant to take a bath in the first place, because every time he went into the male side of the bathhouse, he was mistaken for a little girl. Whether it was from bathing men, or even the attendant, who was a kind old lady named Izumi, who sat at the bandai, Neji couldn't go through one bathhouse visit without being mistaken—at least once—for a girl.

I'd feel bad for the guy, if I didn't find it hilarious because I keep thinking back to when I first told Neji he had pretty hair. It's just…it's literally his hair that is keeping the misconception up. Not saying there is anything wrong with his hair, it's very soft, pretty, and just pretty—Hinata and I combed Neji's hair quite a number of times and I may have given Neji a flower crown once…twice—okay, it was like five times.

But who's counting?

…Well, Ino is, I mean she's the one who likes to keep track of everything whenever she hangs out with us (which is rarely), especially when it involved flowers…I really need to get Ino out of that flower shop. I think it'd be nice to pick up some flowers while I'm at it, so I can give them to Gaara.

Kiba had mentioned that Gaara smelled faintly of blood. It was easy for the Inuzuka to ignore, but not completely. It was tolerable, that's for sure. Otherwise, Kiba would have been avoiding Gaara like the plague from the exact moment he had noticed the redhead smelled of blood.

I'm getting off topic, aren't I?

Back to my original train of thought, everything seemed fine at the time we entered the bathhouse, but as we were coming out of the building after we had finished bathing, I noticed something was off when I heard what sounded like, in what I can't really describe with better terms, perverted laughter.
I stopped walking almost immediately and looked around. When I didn't see anything within my line of sight, I ran ahead of my friends onto the bridge that was ahead of us and turned around so I was facing the bathhouse. I looked around once more and found myself staring at a man with long, white hair, peeking into the women’s side of the bathhouse.

Is that who I think it is that is peeking into the women’s side of the bathhouse?! Like, holy shit, this is so unreal. I had no idea how to react, but when my friends caught up with me and looked in the direction I was staring in, Hinata scared the absolute crap out of me by saying a word I never thought I'd ever hear her say.

"P-Pervert!" Hinata said in a loud and clear voice.

Neji nearly fainted. Shino was blushing. Kiba's eyes were practically bulging out of their eye sockets as he stared at Hinata. Chōji and Shikamaru were rendered speechless. And I had no idea how to react—whether to laugh at the fact that sweet, little Hinata just called Jiraiya a pervert (which is an understatement), or cry at the fact that Hinata said the word, "pervert."

So I did both…I laughed so hard that I was crying.

I'm pretty sure Jiraiya was surprised to see a group of children staring at him from a distance when he had turned to see who had called him a pervert. He was probably annoyed at the fact we had disturbed him, even more so since I wasn't exactly being inconspicuous. I really have no idea what was going on since I was too busy laughing so hard, that my stomach was hurting.

Of course, when Jiraiya suddenly appeared right in front of us, within the blink of an eye, I stopped laughing almost immediately and marveled in the fact that Jiraiya was towering over us. Holy crap, Jiraiya is tall and why am I thinking Disco Ninja Frog right now? God dammit, wrong series, brain!

I'm surprise I didn't start laughing at the Hiimdaisy reference my brain made, since I always found humor in it. Then again, I never expected that I would ever meet up with Jiraiya this early in my current life as Akimichi Chōko. It's like four years too early for this shit—though, after all that has happened, I should have probably expected this… I mean, Jiraiya is Naruto's godfather. And isn't he keeping tabs on the Akatsuki?

Oh my god—that's a thing, isn't it?!

It was only a matter of time that Jiraiya would have heard of Orochimaru and Sasori's visit to Konoha, in which Konoha had lost one of two of its remaining Uchiha that day. Seriously, what the hell is up with this fucking domino effect?!

I need another moment...

"Who's the little lady who called me a pervert?" My moment quickly came to an end when Jiraiya had asked us that question, to which I was quick to blurt out, "It wasn't me!"

First impressions are still not my forte…and it honestly could have been worse. The sad thing about that is that I actually know what I mean when I say it could have been worse. And, once again, it involves Orochimaru…because punching an S-ranked missing-nin in the crotch was as bad of a first impression that I could ever give. And it only got worse from there.

And so that is how our first encounter with the legendary Toad Sage, Jiraiya, commenced. What followed after it was Jiraiya introducing himself in quite the extravagant manner that included traditional kabuki poses. We were rendered speechless, unable to process what had just happened, except that the man before us was named Jiraiya.
I was counting down the seconds when one of us would recognize Jiraiya's name. About thirty had passed before Kiba blurted out that he heard the name before.

"Oh, so you've heard of me?" Jiraiya honestly seemed pleased to know that at least one of us recognized him.

"I-It's the book!" Kiba exclaimed. "The one Shisui read to us!"

"A-Ah, that's right!" Hinata was quick to catch on.

"But is he really the author of that book?" Chōji looked questioningly at Jiraiya.

"Doesn't look like one." Neji was quite blunt.

Jiraiya coughed as he brought our attention to a book he had just pulled out of his shirt. "I'll have you know that I am indeed a writer."

I don't know why, but just looking at the orange-colored book in Jiraiya's hand made me want to shriek at the Sannin to put it away. I mean, there are children here! Hell, I am one of those children! Fuck my chronological age of twenty-seven—it means nothing in this situation!

And, to be honest, it's just embarrassing for me to see Jiraiya hold up *Icha Icha Paradise*, without any shame or decency, considering the contents of said book. Of course, I shouldn't even have any idea of what the contents even were, because I was only eight-years-old (physically), so there went me saying anything…at all. And so are the conflicts of retaining memories of one's past life and experiencing second-hand embarrassment…

I wonder if this was how it felt to be Garry when he caught Ib trying to read a smutty novel…could that scenario even apply to this? Bluh…doubt it. We're not trapped in another world revolving around an art gallery. Eesh—that would be horrifying…I'd rather my life not be represented by a rose.

"How troublesome…" Shikamaru's trademark saying snapped me out of my current train of thought.

"Indeed." Shino adjusted his glasses.

"Okay, I'm lost…what's troublesome?" Thank you, Kiba, for asking the question I wanted to ask.

"How do you think Naruto would react to knowing that the writer of the book he loves is a pervert?" Shikamaru was straight to the point when he wanted to be.

"P-Pervert…" Hinata repeated.

"Okay, where did you even learn that word?! I need to know!

…

"Wait, never mind." I forget that the ladies in the women's half of the baths could be very vocal when they wanted to be when it pertained to Naruto. "Proceed."

"I doubt we should ever let Naruto know…" Chōji remarked.

"Assuming that this man is in fact the writer of that book…" I'm sorry, Shino, but Jiraiya is, in fact, the author of the *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi*.

Yeah, shocking, isn't it? Wait a second…my brain just thought up an idea.
"Hey, hey!" I focused all of my attention on Jiraiya. "Did you write *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi*?"

My question definitely caught Jiraiya off-guard. "That book? Well, thinking about it now, it does make sense as to how all of you would know my name from a book…"

Because adult novels are not for children! Fricken' heck, Jiraiya!

"So you *did* write it!" C'mon, say yes!

"Yeah, I wrote it…" Geez, Jiraiya, you can at least try to show a little enthusiasm. "What of it?"

"Can we get an autograph?!" Naruto will be hella hyped if Jiraiya signed his book!

Jiraiya looked at me for a moment before sighing in defeat. "Sure…where's the book?"

"I…don't have it." Dammit, it's still at Naruto's house. "Uh…can you sign it later?"

"Make sure to give it to me before the month ends," Jiraiya said as he *finally* put away his copy of *Icha Icha Paradise*. "I'm leaving Konoha after that."

"So what brings you to Konoha?" Geez, Chōko, being a little nosy, aren't we—oh who am I kidding? I *want* to be nosy so I can confirm things.

"Just checking up on a few things." Even though Jiraiya's answer was ambiguous as hell, it still *did* confirm that he had business in Konoha. "Since I've already introduced myself, it's only fair if you guys do the same."

One brief introduction from the rest of us later, it came to my attention that we still needed to look for Gaara, Naruto, and Sasuke. When I brought this up to everyone else, we were quick to say goodbye to Jiraiya and run off, looking for our friends…

…

The sun was beginning to set when we finally came across Gaara, Naruto, and Sasuke (and Hound, who was in plain sight, surprisingly). They were back at the Academy courtyard. Gaara had returned to his spot at the swing, with Naruto and Sasuke close by, the three of them just talking to each other. Or rather, Naruto was talking, Sasuke was drawing something in the dirt, and Gaara just listened, saying something every few moments or so, in response to some of Naruto's comments.

Naruto was the first to notice us and called out to us right after that. Sasuke was happy to see us, but Gaara wasn't…at least, at first. Then Naruto managed to ease some of Gaara's worries as we walked over to them. I could tell Gaara was deliberately averting his gaze from me, but I decided to show him that I wasn't holding grudges.

"It's good to see that you're okay, Gaara!" I meant what I said.

And it *hurt* to see the shocked expression on Gaara's face when he looked at me, having heard what I said.

"Chōko-chan usually means what she says!" Naruto reassured.

If there's one thing I learned from my sociology class, it's that what Naruto just said might have hurt my credibility by just a smidge. Diction is extremely crucial in certain situations, such as this one, so Naruto needs to learn when to keep his mouth shut.
"What do you mean, usually?!" I know I'm not exactly the most honest person in the world, but seriously, _usually_? I feel offended.

Naruto laughed sheepishly. "I mean, sometimes you say things that you don't mean, like how you say you're fine, but you're not-ttebayo."

"I see…" So that's what he meant…I guess it's not so bad when you use _that_ example specifically.

"It's honestly a troublesome habit," Shikamaru huffed.

"I didn't ask for your opinion." Or your use of your trademark phrase… "Anyways, I meant what I said, end of story!"

"So…you don't hate me?" I'm not gonna lie, but Gaara's question caught me completely by surprise. It's just…were this any other situation happening to someone else—such as, say, for example, a kid from his village—they would have _every_ reason to cower in fear of Gaara, due to the way he is seen by everyone. But I'm not in that situation and I'm starting to realize how much relevance my actions could have, and it's rather frightening…

But I'm not letting fear get the better of me when my conscience is involved and, honestly, I don't hate Gaara. And I want to make that clear to him. "Nope…why should I?"

Once again, unlike Naruto, Gaara didn't cry. He just stared at me for a moment and nodded his head. It was almost as if he came to an understanding to _not_ question his situation—to just accept it.

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I'm honestly wondering how much trouble we are going to get for bringing Gaara back with us to Naruto's house. Why would we get in trouble? Well, for one thing, Gaara was never supposed to leave with us in the first place. So the fact that it's already late and Gaara is still with us and we all are following through on Naruto's offer to spend the night with him… Rasa isn't going to be happy. And the thing is, Gaara is an insomniac—he can't sleep and Shukaku is the cause of that and I'm guessing Hound is aware of that, from the way he seems annoyed at the fact that he is basically our babysitter for the night. His body language sure seemed to show that he was annoyed…I'm pretty sure I'd be annoyed if I had to stay up all night, watching over two jinchuuriki instead of the usual one.

By the by, Gaara spent the entire night eating all the snacks he had bought from the convenience store. How do I know? There were a lot of empty wrappers next to Gaara when I woke up the next morning. When Hound tried to reach for one of the few uneaten snacks, Gaara's sand smacked Hound's hand away.

"Mine…" Gaara said firmly.

It was certainly the most interesting thing I have ever seen Gaara do…and definitely the cutest. God dammit, I _really_ wanted to hug him, but I didn't want to set him off like yesterday. I sighed as I put on my glasses before _literally_ rolling out of bed and scaring the crap out of everyone when I landed on the floor with a loud, "Thud!"

"Ch-Chōko-chan!" Naruto was the first to react. He peered over the bed and asked, "Are you okay-ttebayo?"
"Is everyone awake?" I need to know.

"Yeah, thanks to you…” Shikamaru groused.

I grinned widely. "Then I'm fine! Hey, hey—we gotta get that book autographed!"

We had less than a week before the month ended—like hell I'm letting Jiraiya leave without autographing Shisui's book…and meeting his godson. Right, that should be a thing. Yup, I totally did not forget Jiraiya was Naruto's godfather for a second—nope. I am totally not in denial and I should just grab that book before I forget…

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...

I was not one bit surprised to find Jiraiya peeking into the women's half of the baths again. In fact, it only proved my point when I suggested to everyone that we checked the bathhouse first. I grinned widely as I stared at Jiraiya. I was so going to regret this later on, buuuut…

"GEE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING PEEKING AT GIRLS, MISTER?!" I made sure to sound as annoying as I could, because my goal was to embarrass Jiraiya…

And I succeeded when he turned around and scowled upon seeing that it was the same group of kids bothering him again. Within less than a second, Jiraiya appeared in front of us.

"That time, it was definitely you." Yup, you're right, Jiraiya…but that's not important. "What do you want?"

"Autograph!" I grinned widely as I held out Shisui's book for Jiraiya to see. "Hey, hey, Naruto, this is the guy who wrote the book!"

"You mean this pervert wrote the book?!" Naruto exclaimed. "What the hell, dattebayo?!"

Jiraiya looked like he was about ready to lash out on Naruto, but he stopped once he got a good look at the blond. He stared at Naruto for nearly a minute before reaching into his shirt to pull out a pen and grabbing the book out of my hands.

"So who is it to?" Jiraiya asked, his gaze never once leaving Naruto. "I'm assuming it's you, so what's your name?"

It took Naruto a second to recover from his shock before he introduced himself as, "Uzumaki Naruto, the next Hokage!"

There was just something endearing about Jiraiya chuckling at Naruto's response that made my heart practically throb. The bittersweet feeling of realizing what Jiraiya's encounter with Naruto actually entailed that was basically a godfather seeing his godson in years.

I need a moment…

...

Our encounter with Jiraiya eventually led us to Ichiraku Ramen, where Jiraiya was treating us to ramen…and probably regretting it, considering how much Naruto, Gaara, my brother, and I were eating. If Hinata wasn't so concerned about other people finding out about her eating habits (she just recently grew comfortable about showing that side of hers around Neji), she would have eaten just as
much, but alas, Jiraiya was around and Jiraiya was someone who was not to know (he is a stranger, technically), so Hinata restrained herself.

When Naruto noticed that Hinata was eyeing the extra-large bowl of ramen he was just recently given by Ayame, he looked at his bowl for a moment before pushing it toward Hinata. Hinata stared at Naruto as he awkwardly rubbed the back of his head.

"I'm…not hungry anymore-ttebayo…" Naruto was lying, all of us could tell, even Hinata, but she didn't say anything. She just smiled at him and said, "Thank you."

When I saw the small blush tinging Naruto's cheeks, I had to bite my lip to keep myself from squealing. I'm seriously a sucker for cute scenes like these and I'm just gonna eat my ramen before I make a scene…

Throughout our current time spent with Jiraiya, I noticed he was paying especially close attention to Gaara as he interacted with Naruto. Jiraiya even asked Gaara if he had been getting enough sleep, to which Gaara nervously replied that he hasn't slept at all. Like…is Jiraiya catching onto Gaara's jinchuuriki status? If he is, Jiraiya better be tactful about it. I don't need Gaara having another freak-out because of reasons involving Shukaku and struggling to keep it a secret.

Speaking of freak-outs, I nearly had one myself when a certain pair of siblings descending from Sunagakure decided to drop by and pay us a visit… And by visit, I mean they found Gaara and were pretty baffled to see him hanging around other kids who were not afraid of him and were actually being rather friendly with him. Temari and Kankurō had no idea how to react and just stared at the scene before them after they called out Gaara's name.

Aaaaaand awkward silence ensued. I think that basically sums up our first meeting with Gaara's siblings. By the by, eleven-year-old Temari and ten-year-old Kankurō are adorable and—wow is it so weird to see Kankurō without his make-up.

"Do you need anything?" Jiraiya decided to make it easier on the rest of us by breaking the silence.

Almost instantly, Temari reacted by pushing Kankurō towards us. "You tell him."

Kankurō scowled at Temari before making his way over to us, muttering under his breath as he did. He stopped walking once he was near Gaara. Gaara stared at Kankurō, his expression completely neutral. Quite the stark contrast in comparison to Kankurō's irritated expression.

"What are you lookin' at?" Kankurō's tone was curt when he spoke to me.

"Oh, fuck you!" I don't tolerate being talked to in such a tone, ya jerk—did I just say that? Nah, crap, I just upped the ante on terrible first impressions…well, at least I didn't punch Kankurō in the crotch, ahaahaha—I'm screwed.

"This is why I hate kids…" Well, aren't you a hypocrite, Kankurō—you aren't even a Genin to even pull that comment off!

"Looks who talking, little boy!" I snapped.

"Little?! You're shorter than me!" Kankurō literally got in my face when he said this…only for my hand to push his face away.

"P-Personal space!" Respect my boundaries before I have to slap a bitch! "Ow!"

Kankurō bit me!
"Don't touch me!" Kankurō said before spitting onto the ground. "Eeugh, you taste like ramen…"

Okay, context…wait a second—oh hell no… "What the hell are you doing, tasting me like that?!"

I'm pretty sure this was the point where Neji decided to stop watching the train wreck that was Kankurō and me getting along well like water and oil because the next thing I knew, I found myself staring at Kankurō, who was now on the ground after Neji struck him in the chest with a palm-strike. All hell was about to break loose when Temari had had enough of watching her little brother getting kicked around by children younger than he was and nearly punched Neji… nearly.

It turned out that Gaara wasn't keen on his older siblings attacking his friends, as noted by how his sand kept Temari away from Neji. Temari nearly freaked when the sand touched her and was quick to back up, her hands brushing off any grains of sand that had gotten on her clothes or arms. She kept doing this, even after it was evident that there was no trace of sand on her.

Whatever Gaara must've done to his older siblings, the trauma was definitely there. Gaara almost looked ashamed when he saw how badly Temari was reacting to his sand. I wasn't too sure. Gaara hid his face when he noticed I was looking at him.

I need to stop staring at people…

"What is going on?" Oh, hello new person I don't know— holy shit, you look like an older Kankurō with dull purple hair! Uh, uh, think quick brain! Genetics, traits, hereditary, mother and father—there we go! That's Rasa and wow, he does not look happy.

Kankurō didn't waste any time getting off the ground. He stood up and adjusted his clothes before exclaiming, "Otou-san! We found Gaara!"

Looks like it's time for round two of awkward silence! Let the staring commence!

"Hey, aren't you the Kazekage?" Never mind, Jiraiya put an end to the awkward silence before it can even begin.

Rasa's attention shifted to Jiraiya. "You are correct…"

Jiraiya nodded his head. "I hear you're in Konoha for certain reasons involving a peculiar incident."

"That is also correct." Rasa looked questioningly at Jiraiya. "Is there something wrong?"

"Well… would it trouble you if we could talk about it in private?" Jiraiya asked Rasa. "It involves your son's sleeping problems."

For one brief moment, Rasa's stern expression was replaced with one of shock before quickly reverting back to his previous one. He looked at Gaara, who was quick to avert his gaze.

"Well?" Jiraiya looked expectantly at Rasa for an answer.

A second passed and Rasa sighed before turning his attention to Temari and Kankurō. "I want you two to watch over Gaara while I go discuss private matters with this man."

Temari and Kankurō looked about ready to protest, but one look from Rasa was all it took to keep them quiet. Shortly after that, Jiraiya and Rasa went on their way to discuss matters regarding Gaara's sleeping problems that I highly suspect to be a euphemism for his jinchūriti status. That left us alone with Temari and Kankurō, both of whom weren't exactly pleased to stick around Gaara.
Once Rasa and Jiraiya were completely out of sight, Kiba leaned in closer to us and whispered, "Who're they?"

"I-I think they're Gaara's older siblings." Hinata looked at Gaara for a confirmation.

Gaara nodded. "They are."

"You didn't say anything about them being here as well…” Naruto was perplexed.

"I never said they weren't here." Gaara had a point.

"Well, now we know," Neji simply said.

"What are their names?" Shino asked.

"Temari is my older sister and Kankurō is my older brother," Gaara replied.

"Why is Temari making a mean face?" Sasuke questioned.

"We're right here, you know!" Temari snapped, eyes narrowed in anger. "So stop talking as if we're not here!"

...

"Are they always this rude?" Shikamaru asked Gaara, looking less than impress as usual.

"You wanna say that to my face?!" Temari scowled at Shikamaru.

Shikamaru blinked a few times and sighed. "Troublesome…"

Chōji grinned. "You're just as bad as Chōko with first impressions."

"At least I don't punch people in the crotch," Shikamaru remarked as he reached over to give my nose a small flick. "Don't do that, okay?"

"Hey!" I resent that! "And don't do that!"

It's embarrassing!

"I'll stop when you stop being so troublesome." Which, in Shikamaru's terms, means never!

Dammit!

Terrible first impressions aside, I don't think Temari's warming up to us anytime soon. The same goes with Kankurō, who has already stated he hates children (even though he is still one himself…). Seeing as we're all done eating and Jiraiya already paid for our ramen, I decided to make a suggestion about paying Ino a visit, since we never had a chance to do so yesterday.

Gaara had no idea who Ino was, but was quite fine with the idea of paying her a visit, as was everyone else. Though, just as we were about to leave, Kankurō asked Gaara a question.

"Where are you goin'?" was what Kankurō asked.

Gaara looked blankly at Kankurō and replied, "With them."

"Otou-san said we had to watch over you!" Temari said. "That means you can't go off on your own like you did yesterday."
"But I don't want to stay here." Gaara's tone was firm. "I want to be with them."

"We're not gonna hurt him, if that's what you're worried about." Sheesh, give the kid a break—you two don't even want to be around him!

"I would be more worried about Kankurō-kun, since Neji-san hasn't forgiven him for biting Chōko-san's hand," Shino remarked.

Did I hear that right? "Really?"

Neji frowned. "Are you annoyed?"

"Why would I be? That just means you've got my back!" I still haven't forgiven Kankurō for being a rude little boy! "I got my eye on you, Kankurō!"

"Right back at you, glasses girl!" It has occurred to me that Kankurō and Temari have no idea who the hell we are…

I decided to fix that a bit by at least giving them my name. "My name's Chōko, not glasses girl!"

"Like I care!" Rude Kankurō is rude.

Though, to be fair, I think I'm being rude as well—but whatever. "C'mon, guys, Ino's probably bored out of her wits without us!"

"Feel free to follow us, because I'm going with them," Gaara told his siblings.

Predictably, Temari and Kankurō did as Gaara had said. I mean, they had to, since Rasa gave them an order and Gaara already stated he was going anywhere we were going, no questions asked. I think Temari and Kankurō were too afraid to question Gaara any longer…

And Gaara doesn't want to deal with his siblings right now. It probably has to do with them potentially letting the proverbial cat out of the bag. I mean, they know about Gaara…and Gaara already has to deal with the fact that he's keeping information from us and Temari and Kankurō just being around…yeah, no pressure.

Ugh, I just wanna hug Gaara and tell him everything will be okay, but no—bad Chōko. Don't be a creeper! It'll just freak him out.

...

Ino was half-asleep when we entered Yamanaka Flowers. She was quite happy to see us and was quick to, for a lack of better terms, glomp Sasuke. Right after that, she noticed a few additions to our circle of friends, most notably, Gaara, and asked who he was.

"You're definitely not from around here," Ino said as she released Sasuke from her hold (much to his immense relief). "I'm Yamanaka Ino! And you are?"

"Suna no Gaara," Gaara replied. "It's nice to meet you…?"

Ino grinned widely at Gaara. "It's nice to meet you too! I'm guessing he's with us now?"

"Yeah, he's pretty much in." Circle of friends, circle of friends… "Not sure about those two, though."

Ino turned her attention away from Gaara and focused her gaze on his older siblings, who were
trying to keep their distance. "And you guys are?"

"Temari and Kankurō—they're Gaara's older siblings," Chōji explained. "They're just following us."

"I think a better term would be babysitting," Shikamaru suggested. "Course, they're doing a pretty crappy job."

"No one asked for your opinion!" Temari snapped.

"And no one asked for your feedback!" Geez, aren't we sassy today, Shikamaru...

"Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!" Oh god dammit, Kiba, don't encourage them—too late.

And if you look to your left, you can see a blonde-haired girl trying to fight a baby sloth. It's as one-sided as it can get, but at the same time, Shikamaru is making an effort. He's rather sluggish about it, but he's still trying. Not that it's really helping, since Temari is not only older than Shikamaru, but also taller and probably stronger.

"Hey, if you two are gonna fight, can you do it outside?" Ino was rather irritated with the scene before her. "Tou-san is not going to be happy about this! Chōko-chan, make them stop!"

Welp, that's my cue to take my leader status seriously and do something. I handed my glasses over to the closest person within my reach—Gaara—and leapt into the current scuffle between Temari and Shikamaru. It took me a couple of minutes, but I manage to pull Temari and Shikamaru apart.

"Knock it off, you two!" The last thing I want is Inoichi giving all of us a lecture—because Inoichi can be fucking scary. Do NOT underestimate the Yamanaka clan, because they are very good at reading people and know just the right words to say to get their point across.

_Inoichi fucking read me like a book within a matter of seconds!_

_I ain't messing with that!_

"He started it!" Temari was quick with her accusations, while Shikamaru just said nothing and sighed. He just looked so done.

"Look, I don't give a crap who started it." So don't even start. "If you two wanna fight, do it outside because I do not want Ino's father to lecture us. Have I made myself clear?"

"Y-Yeah…" Temari replied nervously.

Shikamaru rubbed the back of his head as he averted my gaze. "Whatever you say, Leader…"

"Good!" I smiled as I clapped my hands together. "Now let's get out of here before Ino's mother finds out we're trying to sneak her daughter out of the store."

"What?" Ino was confused.

I took back my glasses from Gaara and put them on before latching into Ino's arm and proceeding to drag her toward the door. "You heard me—now move!"

Quick, before Aoi decides to check up on her daughter!

…

"Safe!" Kiba exclaimed once we were far away from Yamanaka Flowers.
"Very," Shino added.

"Uh-huh." Hinata nodded her head.

Yeah, no thanks to Shikamaru and Temari nearly blowing our cover and almost earning us a scary lecture from Inoichi. "You two can fight now if you want."

"Nah, I don't wanna waste my time with this guy." Temari glared at Shikamaru. "The fight was a little too one-sided for my tastes…lazy ass."

"Meh…" Shikamaru didn't even bother giving Temari's jab at his laziness a proper response.

"That's the laziest response I've ever heard from you." I think that's a new record.

"Nah, I've heard lazier," Chōji remarked. "Though, that is pretty close."

"Seriously?" You mean there's more to Shikamaru's laziness?! "I don't know if I should be amazed or appalled at the fact that you can be that lazy."

Even I wasn't that lazy in my past life and I was quite the lazy person…or am I mixing laziness up with procrastinating?

Actually, I'm pretty sure that was actually depression and some form of executive dysfunction screwing up my productivity for the most part.

There's a lot of shit that I know now that explains a lot of my past behavior, thanks to Inoichi's scarily accurate diagnoses from the symptoms he caught from me (don't even get me started on how everyone else's diagnosis went, because that was pure witchcraft!). What's even scarier is the check-ups we have to do with the man at least once a week, because no matter how much shit we try to hide from him, he'll find out anyways—and that's without using his clan's techniques, which says a lot when he has yet to use it on any of us.

I can only wonder how Ino will turn out, if that's what her father can do...

"So what are we going to do now?" Ino asked. "Knowing you, we're probably going to go eat."

"Nah, we already ate—not sure about those two, though." Temari and Kankurō are a complete mystery to me.

"Hey, we know your names and everything…but you don't know ours," Sasuke decided to finally bring up. Yeah, I was waiting for someone to do that.

"What if we don't wanna know 'em?" Kankurō was being a jerk, as usual.

"Well then, too bad, you're gonna learn them!" If we are going to be insulting each other, I'd rather do it on terms where we know each other's' names. "Start us off, Kiba!"

…

It took me until after we were all done with our introductions to realize there are a lot of us in this circle of friends—like…damn. I feel like I've accomplished something huge in this life by having so many friends. It's not to say that I didn't have a lot of friends in my past life. It's more that I never was able to hang out with so many friends all at once, so consistently for over a long period of time. I'm honestly happy.

"So what's this about you bein' leader? You sure don't look like one." And then Kankurō pretty
much killed my good mood.

"You're three years too late to be saying crap like that, so back off!" I said before promptly pushing Kankurō onto the ground like the eight-year-old brat I am. Hey, give me a chance to be a fricken' kid! God knows I'll regret it if I don't because that's how the shinobi life works. "So what do you guys wanna do?"

Leave it to me to ignore the fact that I pushed Kankurō onto the ground just seconds ago. That ended up biting me in the ass when Kankurō decided to pull on my braid with the force of a shampoo bottle that falls onto your foot in the shower. It is times like these I'm starting to regret ever letting my hair grow out because the pain fucking hurts.

"Aaaaahhh!" Oh god, it feels like my scalp is on fire!

"That was for pushing me!" Kankurō exclaimed before promptly getting tripped by Gaara's sand. "Ack!"

Thud!

"Ha, jokes on you!" I was grinning, even though the back of my head was still stinging from Kankurō's hair pulling.

"Did I do well?" Gaara looks at me with uncertainty, almost questioning if he should regret his actions.

Normally, I wouldn't approve of such actions, but fuck it—Kankurō deserved that! If he wanted to get back at me for pushing him, he shouldn't have resorted to such dirty actions. "You did well, Gaara."

Gaara blinked and nodded his head. "Okay."

"The heck just happened?" Temari stared wide-eyed at us. "I don't even…"

"You might want to get your eyesight checked," Shino remarked. "Because it seems as if your eyesight might just be worse than Chōko-san's."

Ooooh, buuurn. "Need some salve for that burn?"

"I think she needs a medic-nin!" Ino laughed. "Speaking of which, let's go to the hospital and see Sakura-chan!"

Why did I see that coming? Well, at least I'm not injured, so the visit won't incur Fuyuki's wrath. And so began our trek to the hospital, with Kankurō and Temari following us reluctantly. Surprisingly enough, we all managed to make it there in one piece (though Kankurō nearly got his nose broken by Neji, who didn't exactly appreciate Kankurō's hair pulling).

Sakura was on her break when we found her. She was quite happy to see us, though somewhat perplexed about Gaara, Kankurō, and Temari. One short introduction later and Sakura was getting along quite nicely with Gaara, who was slowly loosening up around us, no longer being quite as tense as he usually was.

Kankurō treated Sakura with great indifference, and Temari honestly seemed astonished. She stared at Sakura, not saying much until Sakura spoke to her, at which Temari just said, "Your hair is pink."

Sakura blinked a few times and grabbed a lock of her hair. "Yeah, I've noticed. Kaa-san says that it's
the reason why I'm named Sakura."

"You're the girl who helped make that antidote!" Temari blurted out. "How the hell?!!"

Sakura was blushing at this point. "Ehh, so Sunagakure knows about me??"

"Nah, we just heard it from your Hokage," Kankurō said as he crossed his arms. "Though, when he said you were young, I didn't think he meant this young…"

"You're just jealous because Sakura is amazing!" I exclaimed as I hugged Sakura. "Right, Sakura?"

Sakura sputtered a bit before hiding her face behind her hands. "…"

"She's a shy, little flower!" Ino giggled.

"Speaking of flower…" Sasuke looked questioningly at Ino. "Are you ever going to tell me who keeps leaving me forsythias?"

That's still a thing, by the way. We still don't know who is doing it, but the flowers have certainly helped Sasuke cope a bit after we lost Itachi.

"I need to go now!" Sakura suddenly spoke up. "My break's almost over and Ruki-sensei's gonna get mad if I'm late!"

Sakura didn't even give me a warning when she suddenly pulled herself out of my embrace. She at least wasn't rough, just a bit sudden. She excused herself before running off to return to her post. I blinked a few times before adjusting my glasses and turning to Ino, who just shrugged at me.

"Anyways, as I was saying, are you going to tell me who keeps leaving those flowers?" Sasuke looked at Ino for an answer—only to get her playfully sticking her tongue out at him. "H-Hey!"

"If you want to know, then find out on your own!" Ino grinned mischievously at Sasuke.

"Since we can't exactly sneak Sakura out of here, what do we do now?" Kiba decided to change the subject.

"Hey, hey, Chōko-chan—do you have any ideas?" Naruto looked questioningly at me.

I sighed as I rubbed the back of my head. I really have no idea what to do. I am seriously out of ideas. "We could…visit Hanabi?"

"I don't think Hiashi-sama would approve of those two entering the Hyuuga compound." Neji wasn't even hiding the fact that he had been referring to Temari and Kankurō when he said "those two."

"What about me?" Gaara asked Neji.

Neji looked over Gaara. "You're absolutely fine."

"Ah." Gaara's eyes practically lit up upon hearing that. "I see…"

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There is just something oddly mesmerizing about watching Gaara interact with little Hanabi. It's plain amusing to see Kankurō and Temari anticipating for things to go wrong. Honestly, I was afraid of
this scenario taking a bad turn, but at the same time, it gives me a sense of hope, seeing Gaara being accepted by someone, such as Hanabi. She greeted him with open arms right from the start. Of course, Gaara still wasn't keen on physical contact, but allowed Hanabi to hold his hand, at least.

"Gaa!" Hanabi called out to Gaara, smiling when she saw his surprised expression.

"Gaara," Gaara tried to correct Hanabi.

Hanabi giggled and exclaimed, "Gaa!"

"You might as well get used to it," Neji remarked. "Once Hanabi-sama sets her mind on a name, it's difficult to convince her otherwise."

"At least she just calls you Nii!" Kiba huffed. "I get called Nana."

"Nana!" Hanabi called out to Kiba, as if to prove his point. "Where Chichi?"

Everyone seemed to freeze when Hanabi asked the dreaded question. Temari and Kankurō were confused, with Gaara having some knowledge on the subject, thanks to last night's sleepover (in which we did the sleeping and Gaara just spent the night awake, eating snacks and hanging out with Hound). Sasuke was quick to inform them that it was a forbidden subject to talk about and, surprisingly enough, Temari and Kankurō understood the situation without question.

When we tried to sneak Hanabi out of the Hyuuga compound, Hanabi's caretaker, Natsu, stopped us. Yeah, thing about Hanabi was, right after Itachi left the village, with no one else to really watch over us and considering the Orochimaru and Sasori incident, Hiashi decided that he wasn't going to risk Hanabi's wellbeing in the hands of a group of Academy students and got her a caretaker. Said caretaker happens to be a kunoichi who was also a Hyuuga, so good luck trying to sneak a two-year-old girl under the nose of someone who possessed the Byakugan.

Hanabi was pouting as we left the compound, even though we said we could come back and visit some other time. I'm guessing she had grown so accustomed to sneaking out that the first time such an attempt was foiled left a bit of a bitter taste in her mouth.

"R-Remind me to get her some bananas and milk," Hinata told me some time after we left the Hyuuga compound.

"I'll try." No promises, because chances are, I might forget. "So what are we going to do now? I'm all out of ideas."

Before any of us could say anything (Temari and Kankurō included), Hound suddenly appeared before us. He gestured at Gaara, explaining that Rasa wished for Gaara to come with him. Gaara wasn't exactly keen on leaving with Hound until he explained that it had to do with his sleeping problems.

Gaara swallowed hard before looking at us and saying he had to go. Naruto was quick to tell Gaara to wait for all of us tomorrow at the Academy swing so that we could regroup after classes. Gaara hesitated to say anything and just nodded his head in response.

Gaara, Temari, and Kankurō left with Hound not long after, leaving the rest of us on our own. What happened afterwards brought us back to the Hyuuga compound (after buying a small pint of milk and a bunch of bananas) and making a game out of trying to sneak Hanabi past Natsu. We failed...horribly.

"You might as well give up." Natsu smiled sweetly at us, even though she had just finished freeing
us from the trap we activated…that she set up herself.

"Natsu mean~!" Hanabi whined.

Natsu is seriously good at her job…and is a cutie-patootie with nice hair— "Can I touch your hair?"

...

Natsu sighed. "Shisui-san was right…you never seem to change, do you, Akimichi-san?"

"Hey, how do you know Shisui-nii?" Naruto looked questioningly at Natsu.

Natsu blinked a few times. "Did Shisui-san ever tell you? I was on Team Hamaki with him and Itachi-san."

"Wait, how come we never heard about you?" The hell, man! "Okay, forget that—do you have any stories about the dork and Itachi-san back when you guys were Genin—you are a Chuunin, right?"

Natsu nodded her head and smiled. "I am, indeed…and the reason you haven't heard of me is because I became a Chuunin before Itachi-san and Shisui-san—and yes, they failed their first time."

Well, that's an eye-opener. "Tell us of their failures."

I want all the details.

...

So apart from obtaining blackmail material to use against Itachi, we found out a lot about Hyuuga Natsu, Hanabi's caretaker. Natsu is from the Branch family and is a Chuunin. She also has some minor medic-nin training from an apprenticeship she took up, shortly after becoming a Chuunin. That explained why it was just Shisui and Itachi—because Natsu was busy doing other things. And Mimura Hamaki was their Jounin.

The more you know…

...

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The day went by as usual after that, with the exception of Hanabi trying to sneak out of the Hyuuga compound on her own, now that she could no longer depend on us, thanks to Natsu. And, once again, thanks to Natsu, Hanabi's attempts have been rendered futile.

When Chōji and I returned home that day, I ended up having to deal with Chōza and Ageha, since they wanted to talk to be about my recently discovered ophidiophobia. Surprisingly, it went better than I expected. I was expecting them to make a huge deal out of it, but Chōza and Ageha had been nothing, but supportive. And then Chōza edited his kill-list to make Orochimaru's death slow and painful.

Holy fuck, Dad!

I'm starting to wonder if this is the norm for shinobi parents. At the same time, I'm relieved because Fuyuki kept his word and stayed quiet about yesterday's incident. I might as well do the same thing and keep myself out of trouble…at least until the month ends.

Come the next day, I was fully expecting another typical school day…then Gaara entered the
classroom during Iruka-sensei's lecture.

Iruka-sensei was puzzled to see Gaara and asked him what he was doing. Gaara looked around the room and, upon spotting us, directed Iruka-sensei toward us. Iruka-sensei stared at us for a few seconds before sighing and telling Gaara to introduce himself.

"Suna no Gaara," Gaara said before scampering over to sit with the rest of us.

Iruka-sensei shook his head, muttering a few words under his breath, before continuing his lecture. All was good after that...then Temari and Kankurō barged into the room and, having had enough of class disruptions, Iruka-sensei didn't even bother asking them for their names and just told them to sit down with us after making them introduce themselves to the class. Like, Iruka-sensei didn't even have to be told that they were with us—he just knew.

...

I'm starting to worry about our future associates if this is what will happen, even though we technically weren't friends with Temari and Kankurō. We're more like acquaintances of the vitriolic sort. I'm hoping it'll get better, or else I'm not gonna have a good time, four years from now, during the Chuunin exams...assuming I make Genin, get assigned to a team with a Jounin, and actually make it to the Chuunin exams.

Ahahaha, I'm funny to even think that I wouldn't even make it that far, considering the fact that I am the daughter of the current head of the Akimichi clan. I was screwed the day I was born. And if not that, then my internal fear of academic failure certainly motivated my need for success that earned me enough high grades that I have this extremely sinking feeling I might get Kunoichi of the Year when I graduate (please let me jinx myself for saying that!).

I had the chance to become a civilian. Honestly, I did...but I stayed silent because I had no idea whether or not I wanted to become a shinobi. When Chōza started training Chōji and I, I just went along with it without complaint because I had nothing better to do. During any given moment that I spent running laps, I could've stopped, walked over to father, and admitted disinterest in the shinobi life.

I didn't...and just kept running, even though I didn't want to. Maybe it was the fact that no one was telling me I couldn't become this or I had to become that—there was really no pressure for me to make a decision. I never even contemplated the civilian life, so was there even a decision to make in the first place?

I have no idea and I wonder if I should be concerned. I'm over eight-years-old, and not once, have I ever given myself a moment to think about the civilian life. It's a bit too late for that now, but it still bothers me that I left something so dire out of my own thoughts until now. Is this how I'm going to make my decisions in the future?

Time flies by so easily the more I think about the question I've asked myself. Soon, it is lunchtime and I'm still thinking about the question, even as I eat. I have yet to come across an answer, though I still search for one.

It's only until I feel a weight on my shoulder that I finally snapped out of my thoughts and returned to the reality before me. I'm somewhat disoriented, maybe even a little disconcerted, but the feeling quickly passes. My ears eventually pick up on the conversation going on between my friends and Gaara's siblings. Temari has mellowed out quite a bit, most likely the result of her having had the chance to actually talk with us.
Temari took a moment to reprimand Kankurō for not joining in the conversation and compared him to Shikamaru, who was doing the same thing. Kankurō scowled whilst Shikamaru just brushed off Temari's comment and continued eating his food. The lack of snarky comebacks from Shikamaru concerns me for a moment until I remember that silence was his tactic in avoiding conflict. This was how Shikamaru acted around his mother, Yoshino, whenever she was yelling at him.

Shikaku does the same thing sometimes and—oh, wow. Well, ahaha…like father, like son, I guess.

...

I should probably focus on something else entirely because I'm not even sure if I need a moment for that. Be still, my beating heart—it's too soon for that… Okay, who the hell is leaning on me?

I couldn't even begin to fathom who would have the gall to lean on me like a wall. So when I turned my head to see whom it was, my heart nearly stopped. Because the last person I ever expected to lean on me was Gaara, who happens to be asleep right now.

What…the absolute fuck…am I seeing? Why is everyone—I mean, Temari and Kankurō…why are they calm? Why am I calm? Wait—no, I'm not calm…I'm like seconds away from freaking out.

In…out…in…out…calm, calm, calm, calm, calm—it's fine! Nothing bad is happening—don't look a gift horse in the mouth. Everyone sleeps…even though Gaara shouldn't be sleeping, because of how Shukaku works—oh…right.

I almost forgot…ha…

If I recalled correctly, sleeping problems was the term used as a euphemism for Gaara's jinchuuriki status—quite a fitting one, when you think about it. Based on yesterday's events, I can only assume that Jiraiya was involved and the outcome was Gaara finally being able to sleep.

I wonder if he's having any good dreams…if he is, then I'm glad. I hope you like sleep, Gaara…because it seems you're going to be doing a lot of that from here on out.

I later found out that whatever fixed Gaara's "sleeping problems" was temporary and due to the experimental nature of it, Gaara was to stay in Konohagakure for further observation. Naruto was absolutely happy to hear that because that meant Gaara got to stick around with us a little longer. The same could be said about Jiraiya who, despite originally saying that he would leave Konoha when the month ended, stayed long past his original departure date.

One week passed, during which Gaara tried cake for the first time in his life…and loved it. The thing about living in Sand Country is that it is rare to have a steady supply of ingredients, given how most of the land is desert, which is why Gaara never had a chance to try cake back in Sunagakure.

Meanwhile with Temari and Kankurō, for them, it was the first time in years since they ate cake. They would have had more, but Gaara ended up eating most of it.

Jiraiya was slowly growing used to our surprise ambushes at the bathhouse. Sometimes, we would come across him in town, in the midst of flirting with women, to which Naruto was quick to put an end to it because he wanted to spend more time with the person who signed the book Shisui gave him. Jiraiya was visibly annoyed each time, but sighed in defeat and ruffled Naruto's hair before asking us where we wanted to go.

Hanabi stopped asking where "Chichi" was, now that Gaara was visiting. Temari quickly became Mari and Kankurō became Kuro. I found myself snickering a bit when I realized that Kankurō's nickname could very well translate to the color black, which is the color of the outfit he will
eventually wear in the future. Foreshadowing can be funny when it's done in such subtle ways and I need to stop being a nerd…

Apart from that, it was a rather calm week with nothing too drastic occurring. Though, come week two, things stirred up a bit at the Academy. With students learning that Gaara, Kankurō, and Temari were from Sunagakure and were also the children of the Kazekage, it wasn't that much of a surprise to see them getting swarmed during lunchtime. Gaara didn't take too well to the attention, preferring to stay with us rather than socialize with others. Kankurō was visibly irritated, what with his hatred toward children (never mind that he is still a child himself). And Temari was trying her best to hold her tongue, because she didn't want to get in trouble for speaking her mind—no matter how much she wanted.

Then Hibachi entered the picture and things nearly took a turn for the worst when he tried to pull Gaara away from Naruto. Considering the derogatory manner in which Hibachi referred to Naruto as, all whilst giving the blond dirty looks, Gaara was not pleased…and I was almost worried that Hibachi was going to get his ass killed.

Then Temari intervened by kicking Hibachi away from Gaara, yelling, "Don't touch him!"

This caught Gaara completely by surprise. He had no idea what to say and just stared at Temari, who was telling everyone to get the hell away from her little brother. At eleven years, Temari was not only the oldest amongst us, but also the tallest. No one dared to question Temari and ran off, for fear of provoking her wrath.

Once everyone had left us alone, Kankurō turned to Temari and said, "You called him your little brother…"

"Ah…I guess I did." Temari was a little surprised, but was quick to divert her attention to something else. "What's for lunch today?"

Gaara said nothing for the rest of the day, speaking only when Sasuke asked if something was wrong. Gaara just shook his head and said he was thinking. About what, Gaara didn't say, but I had an idea of what it was, come the next day, when Gaara nearly gave Kankurō heart attack for referring to him as, "Nii-san."

Gaara had been contemplating his relationship with his siblings. Knowing how much of a mess his relationship with them was, I'm guessing he wanted to change that. It was probably going to be a slow (and painful) process mending such a relationship, but hey, it was a start. I'm rooting for you, Gaara. You deserve your chance at happiness.

Throughout the rest of the week, Jiraiya tried his hardest to avoid us, but we kept finding him. Even though he verbally stated his annoyance with us, it was easy to tell that he didn't actually mind our presence—Naruto, especially. Life was good…

Of course, all good things must eventually come to an end, much like the observational period over Gaara and the temporary fix to his "sleeping problems", which he had none whatsoever, as he slept peacefully during these two weeks (and enjoyed it). When Temari broke the news to us that they would be leaving for Sunagakure the next day, we were honestly saddened. In the past two weeks we got to spend with Gaara and his siblings, we really grew attached to their presence.

Gaara didn't really speak to us that day, though he did keep trying to tell me something before backing out at the last second. I didn't find out what it was that he wanted to tell me until the next day, when all of us (that being the Rookie 9, Neji, Hanabi—and Natsu, by that extension—and me) were saying our goodbyes to Gaara, Kankurō, and Temari as they were ready to leave
Konohagakure through one of the four entrance gates. Gaara had just walked up to me and said something to me. I didn't catch what he said at first, because he had said it so quietly, so I asked if he could repeat what he had said.

"Can I have a hug?" was what Gaara asked me before suddenly wrapping his arms around me in an embrace.

I was honestly shocked. This was the last thing I had ever expected to happen. It took me a moment to recover before I returned Gaara's embrace. It was...weird, if only because this was the first time Gaara's sand wasn't in the way. He was warm and his heart—it was beating rather rapidly. He was probably nervous...I wouldn't blame him.

"We're gonna miss you, ya know..." But I know we'll meet again.

Gaara said nothing and just tightened his embrace. It was at that moment that Hanabi decided to join in on the hugging and latched onto Gaara's waist.

"Miss you..." Hanabi said, somehow managing to hug Gaara without his sand getting in the way.

I don't know if it was from the physical contact or the fact that he could have been holding it in for this long, but Gaara started crying right after hearing Hanabi say that to him. Not long after that, Hanabi and I were no longer the only ones hugging Gaara, as everyone else joined in for a group hug that gave me a sense of déjà vu.

I could only imagine the looks on everyone else's faces as they witnessed the group hug happening before them. Temari and Kankurō were most likely freaking out over the fact that Gaara was crying, Rasa and the others (bodyguards, most likely) were probably just stunned over the fact that Gaara, despite crying, was still managing to keep it together...at least, I can only assume. That aside, it took Gaara a bit of coaxing before he was willing to let any of us go.

Gaara had calmed down by then, but he was still teary-eyed and sniffing as he walked over to join Kankurō and Temari at their side. He seemed so sad...

It took me a couple of seconds to realize that, once Gaara returned to Sunagakure, he would be alone again. I bit my lip and looked at Naruto, who seemed to be onto something the more he looked at Gaara. A minute passed before Naruto's eyes lit up.

"Heeey!" he exclaimed. "Why don't we stay in touch, dattebayo?"

Gaara blinked. " Hmm?"

"We could send each other letters, can we-ttebayo?" Naruto looked questioningly at Rasa, who seemed mildly surprised. "Can we?"

"Whatever you two do is none of my business," Rasa remarked. "Feel free to do as you wish."

Naruto grinned widely. "You heard him, dattebayo! We can send each other letters, so please don't cry Gaara! Remember, you're not alone."

Gaara nodded his head. "Right...thank you, Naruto."

And for the first time since we first met him, Gaara smiled. It was rather unfortunate that we didn't have Shisui's camera on us, because that was certainly a memory worth preserving. Of course, I doubt we would ever forget that smile. It was one of genuine happiness. It was going to be a hard four years for Gaara, but the fact that he isn't alone might help him immensely.
Right after Gaara had left, Jiraiya soon followed after, but not before leaving Naruto a gift in the form of a toad-shaped wallet that soon earned the name, "Gama-chan." I definitely needed a moment after that…

*How is this all happening so soon?*

A few days later, we discovered that a certain dog-masked ANBU was no longer following us. During that same day, a silver-haired young man arrived at Naruto's doorstep and introduced himself as Hatake Kakashi, a Jounin assigned by the Sandaime to move in with Naruto and Sasuke. It took me nearly half an hour to put two and two together to realize that watching over Gaara must have been Kakashi's last mission as an ANBU before getting reassigned by Sarutobi. Though, I haven't the faintest idea as to why Kakashi was to be living with Naruto and Sasuke from here on out…then again, this would make it easier for Kakashi to watch over Naruto and Sasuke.

I didn't really think too much about it after that, since I didn't want to give myself a headache. Besides, getting to know Kakashi was *muuuch* more interesting. It might be four years too early for any of us to meet Kakashi, but after all that has happened…I really don't mind. Because at least Kakashi won't kill us, and I really appreciate that.

Life resumed to its usual routine once we adjusted to Kakashi's presence in our lives. Hinata soon turned eight and the year came to an end shortly after. It's honestly shocking how much happened in the past year—both good and bad. And yet, there are still enough good memories within the year to balance out the misfortune…or at least ease some of the pain. There is still a lot we have to cope with, but for now, everything is good.

**Chapter End Notes**

Holy shit, it's been a while…and holy crap, look at this loooong chapter! Yeah, thought that'd make up for the late update. Anyways, I've been busy with life (and college bitch slapping the hell out of me). Just finished going to an anime convention that kept me and my friends busy—we met Kyle Herbert, voice of Kiba (and Kazuichi from Danganronpa 2), Cristina Vee, and Christine Cabanos and got all of their autographs. I am happy…sooo happy.

Sooo…stuff happened in this chapter. Jiraiya made an early appearance, as did Temari, Kankuro, and Rasa, Gaara got to get some sleep, and Kakashi is now living with Sasuke and Naruto. Make what you will of that. Chōko's fast metabolism finally got explained and I thank reviewer Wyrv for that. I especially thank them for me going into depth about hiden techniques in this story, because somehow, SCIENCE made its way into this story YET AGAIN. Kinda funny now that I'm planning on double majoring in science, ahaha…

There was also some shipping in this chapter that you have to look for. As I mentioned before, it's still too early to make pairings, but I'm not against building up chemistry. Also, Hyuuga Natsu…I ended up including her, due to her status as Hanabi's caretaker. She was originally just meant to be there, but then I got too into her character and gave her a background and whoops. Ahaha, yeah, the things I do out of nowhere, sometimes.
So Team Hamaki is a thing and that is all you need to know.

And in this chapter, you find out just how dangerous having connections can be, so the fact that Naruto is included into them really makes it a bad idea to mess with him. But yeah, moving on, I gotta make a point about hiden techniques…it isn't a typo, that is how it is spelled. Hiden or 秘伝, literally means "secret tradition"…thought I'd put that up in case anyone is confused. By the by, I need to correct an earlier A/N in terms of me mixing up the whole reincarnation thing between Sasuke and Naruto. I meant to say they are Kaguya's grandsons, not sons…I will admit to my mistake and keep it at that. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer who told me that for being kind about it.

That aside, let me talk about the name of this chapter, Chrysalis. Chrysalis is used to refer to butterfly pupa, of which is the stage between the larva and adult stages. Keep in mind that Chōko's name means "Butterfly Child". So what I'm trying to say is that there will be a time skip in the next chapter. So prepare yourselves, everyone! It's time for Chōko to become a chrysalis!

Anyways, I would like to give a shout-out to my good friend, ChibiFoxAI, for helping me out in certain points of this chapter. Gaara eating cake, the explanation about the lack of consistent ingredients in Sand Country, Chōko embarrassing Jiraiya, and then some…are all thanks to her!

And if anyone is wondering about my Naruto OTPs, just look at the last Naruto chapter for a reference. You'll find them there and yes, I am shipping trash. Let me be.

I think that's about it for this chapter. I hope you readers enjoyed it! Over 12000 words this time around! I am quite happy! I seriously hope I didn't botch anything up in this chapter, so until next time everyone!
Graduation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's honestly amazing how fast four years can go by. One day, you're eight years old, the next, you've just turned twelve—or at least, that's how it felt. During these past four years, a lot of things have happened.

First off, Akamaru joined our circle of friends on Kiba's ninth birthday. Tanabata that year was certainly interesting and Akamaru fit quite nicely into our group, despite being a rambunctious puppy who liked to urinate at random—Kiba mentioned that it was a phase.

It was…

Then, come next year, at four years old, Hanabi finally managed to sneak out of the Hyuuga compound on her own. She ended up following Neji and Hinata when they left the compound for our usual meet-ups, to which Neji had a bit of a freak-out because now Hanabi had the potential to sneak out whenever she wanted.

"We are such bad influences!" I don't know whether to be proud or sad.

"Hiashi-sama is not going to be pleased…" Neji said as he clutched his head in his hands.

Kiba was baffled. "She's not even an Academy student and she's managed to do what only Itachi and Shisui can do…we suck."

Meanwhile with Hinata, she was praising Hanabi for her stealth. That was the highlight of that year.

The year right after that, mandatory kunoichi lessons came to an end. Kunoichi lessons were only mandatory for female students up until the age of ten. By the by, it should be noted that any Academy student can take a kunoichi class—it's just mandatory for female students and no one really wants to put in the extra effort to take a class that's entirely optional to them. So come the next school year, us female students were free! It was shortly right afterwards, that Ami, Fuki, and Kasumi left the Academy, having managed to graduate early. I don't know what happened to them, if they ended up on the Genin Reserves, waiting to be assigned to a team, or if they were already assigned onto a team, but I hope they were at least happy. I mean, they were one step closer to fulfilling their goals.

I wish them luck...

We taught Hanabi how to swim that summer, with Natsu joining us, having caught on to Hanabi's stealthy escape habits. It was during those swimming lessons that we all found out who tanned and who burned. Sasuke sure as hell didn't tan (he learned that the hard way), and Hinata, Hanabi, Neji, and Natsu all avoided getting sunburned with the power of sunblock. Everyone else tanned, except for Shino, who wore a wetsuit…Shino didn't like showing skin. But yeah, the rest of us tanned and sweet merciful heavens, Kiba and I tanned a lot…like, we were pretty dark by the end of the week. Shikamaru and Choji were moderately tanned (like a lighter shade of brown in comparison to Kiba and I), and Sakura and Ino were just sun-kissed. Naruto was an interesting case because he didn't tan at all…nor did he burn. His skin-tone remained the same, despite the amount of exposure he had under the sun. It was strange…but then I recalled the Kyuubi in his stomach and called it a day in finding the reason as to why Naruto didn't tan (or burn).

As for why I tanned more than Choji—that reason alone was because of genetics. I took more after
Mama in that department. I was at least happy that I didn't burn, because getting sunburned is *not* fun.

*The flaking itches and is disgusting!*

Kakashi liked to make a habit out of trying to avoid us, considering how amusing we found it to pester him for lessons, what with him being a Jounin and his incapability to pass a Genin team (not even two years, and already, Kakashi made a reputation for himself as a Jounin).

"If you actually had a team, then this wouldn't be happening," Neji told Kakashi.

Kakashi looked at Neji with one eye before focusing it back on the book he was reading, *Icha Icha Paradise*. "But then I wouldn't be able to spend time with my favorite Academy students."

"Heeey, whatcha readin'?" I found my curiosity getting the better of myself when I decided to look over Kakashi's shoulder. I quickly found myself getting pushed away by Kakashi, who decided to be the authoritative figure in preventing a ten-year-old girl from reading hardcore smut.

"Now, now, Chōko-chan, it's not your time." Kakashi then closed his book and stopped reading for the rest of the day.

Naruto and Sasuke, from that point on, decided they wanted to know what was *inside* of that book. And so began the game of "guess what Kakashi is reading", which was soon followed by, "What's under that mask?"

Kakashi found these games amusing and made it his goal to make our lives difficult in regards to those games. He is such a troll…

When Neji turned twelve years old, the rest of us were either eleven or turning eleven (with the exception of Hanabi, who was six years old and still losing baby teeth, like the rest of us). By now, everyone was wearing their canon outfits, with Naruto having worn his iconic orange outfit since turning ten years old. It had been a gift and replaced the orange hoodie that Naruto used to wear.

I still wore the same clothes as Chōji and it was during one morning, as I was adjusting my scarf in front of a mirror, that I came to a realization of how much I resembled my twin brother. I looked like a thin-version of him. It was quite jarring…because it reminded me about the first time I had ever seen Chōji with a slim build—that being when he was fighting against Jirōbō. Chōji nearly died in that fight, because he used the Three Colored Pills. It was a sobering thought and image that made me worry about the future. I really care for my brother. Maybe that's why I like wearing the same clothes as he does… It gives us a connection of some sort with each other.

I snuck up on Chōji and tackled him onto the ground, in a hug, afterwards in an attempt to cheer myself up. Chōji didn't appreciate it, but the two of us were soon laughing.

I live for these moments. These are what I treasure.

Neji graduated sometime later into the year. We all expected it and celebrated when Neji approached us, wearing his hitai-ate in place of the usual cloth he had covering his forehead. Unlike the cloth he had covering his forehead, Neji didn't allow me to smack stickers onto his hitai-ate. He kept the sticker, though…because he earned it for graduating.

"I'll be sure to keep that reason in mind," is what he told me before going on his way to prepare for his team placement next week.

Around two weeks later, Neji introduced his teammates and Jounin-sensei to all of us. Maito Gai was absolutely ecstatic to see just how "youthful" Neji was for having so many friends. Tenten was
amazed, having thought that Neji was too uptight to even make any friends, and Rock Lee was holding my hand, confessing his love for me—what?!

What the actual fuck?!

Okay, I must've missed the memo or something, because for some reason… I caught the attention of Rock Lee, owner of strong eyebrow game and main character of a spin-off (that I may or may not have enjoyed watching much more than I should have). Like, how in the hell—we just met!

Oh, don't tell me I was staring again—dammit, I need to stop doing that! Of course, the only reason I was even staring at Rock Lee in the first place was because I had forgotten that he didn't always look like a Mini-Gai. Though, that wasn't really a good excuse because Lee mistook my staring for interest and now he's over here, complimenting my looks and saying how much he's heard of me and—oh god dammit, why am I common knowledge?! Curse you, gossip!

Now how to diffuse the situation without hurting Lee, because I liked the kid and thought he was cute—no romo.

Crushes are weird and I doubt I'll be developing any until after I hit late adolescence...

"Lee!" Tenten exclaimed. "You shouldn't go bothering girls like that!"

It's not that I'm bothered. I'm more shocked, because let's face it—I'm no Sakura. Like, really—Lee could do better than plain, ol' me. "Look, I'm really flattered, but—huh?"

It was at that moment that Neji pulled me away from Lee and told him not to get himself romantically involved with any of his friends. The two of them got into a bit of a heated argument after that, in which Lee challenged Neji to a fight. Gai then made a comment about the youthfulness of young love that no one really cared to hear about and Tenten just had enough and told us to leave, with Neji agreeing with her.

Since that day, Neji made it a habit to keep us away from his team—for our sake, considering Gai's eccentricity and Lee's similar behavior. Tenten was quite fine, but she would rather none of us get involved. We rarely saw Neji after that, and on the days we did see him, he was usually exhausted, somewhat bruised, and usually training on his own—sometimes with little Hanabi at his side.

I still haven't gotten used to seeing him less…it just feels so empty without him, but what can you do? Soon, we'll be seeing less of each other when we become Genin ourselves. I don't really like that thought, so I usually try to ignore the fact that we'll eventually go our separate ways. We'll still see each other—just not as often. Ugh, it's high school graduation all over again...

Hanabi was already a student at the Academy by now, with a habit of sneaking out of her own classes to join the rest of us. Sometimes, she snuck into Neji's class (prior to his graduation), but she preferred to crash Iruka-sensei's classes because of the way he reacted to unexpected guests. Of course, after a certain point, Iruka-sensei grew used to Hanabi's visits and just made it a point to treat her as if he was any of his other students. Because no matter how many times Iruka-sensei told her, Hanabi would not go back to her class.

Hiashi was not pleased, but quickly adjusted to the idea that his youngest daughter was a rebel—if only because of her prodigious progress. I worry about Hanabi...because if she keeps it up at this rate, Danzō might take an interest in her. Then again, Hiashi was the overprotective father when he wanted to be, so there was that. Besides, Hanabi was a bit of a prankster, no thanks to Naruto having
had a bit of an influence on her. Now Mizuki has to deal with the outcome that came out of that, what with him being Hanabi's instructor.

Mizuki was not pleased and Iruka-sensei was just plain amused.

Naruto began taking the graduation exams (he's already taken them twice and failed both times), even though it wasn't recommended for any of us (at least, in our class) to take it just yet. Students are able to graduate early, but the usual norm is for everyone to take the graduation exam with the rest of their class at an appointed date. Of course, one could graduate early and stay behind in the Academy on the Genin Reserves, willingly, until the rest of their class graduates—which isn't an uncommon occurrence. It made it easier for assigning teams.

Throughout these four years, Naruto and Gaara have been sending letters to each other. This has helped Naruto improve his reading and writing immensely. I could only assume that Gaara had a better sense of stability with each letter he received. Sometimes, Temari liked to send letters herself that contained pictures of her, Kankurō, and Gaara. It had been a slow and steady process, but Gaara's relationships with his siblings had improved. To what extent, I have no idea, but Gaara seemed happier in the photographs that were sent to us.

During these same four years, Mama became a literal Cooking Mama when she had all of us (including the boys) learn how to cook (or improve our cooking, depending on the person), because she didn't want any of us to end up on a team that couldn't cook its own food. The result ended with most of the guys having decent cooking skills—not too good, not too bad. The exceptions to such were Shino, Neji, and Chōji, whose cooking was far better.

I'm honestly surprised that Sakura was even able to spend more time with us, but I'm guessing she's reaching a point where she can take days off when she wants to, considering how well her progress has been. Go her.

Jiraiya made it a habit to drop by Konoha for at least a week, usually around or near Naruto's birthday. We made it a habit to ruin every perverted action Jiraiya tried to pull, much to his annoyance. Still, Jiraiya seemed to enjoy spending time with us.

Kiba managed to cope with his hemophobia in the end, so that it no longer hindered his ability as a shinobi. Not to say that blood still didn't weird him out, it was more that Kiba could endure being around it—the sight and scent of it, that is.

I never got over my fear of snakes and Inoichi put off any attempts at getting over said fear, out of concern for my health. He said he wants to try again later, when I'm a bit older, to see how I handle it then. To be honest, I doubt I'll ever get over my fear...which really sucks, but what can you do?

I'm hoping to at least break free from my tendency to have an irrational freak-out...

And what of the Oiroke no Jutsu? Well, if it wasn't obvious to me before, during visits to the bathhouse, then it was today, when Naruto used that technique instead of transforming into Iruka-sensei for today's in-class test. I just looked at the scene before me (might've also ogled Naruko's breasts a bit longer than what was necessary—niiice), and then sighed because I know what was coming tomorrow. Graduation was coming and that meant the moment of truth was finally going to reveal itself to me.

What exactly is going to happen to me? I already have a sneaking suspicion, but for the most part, I just hope I don't end up on whatever team Hibachi ends up on, because I will make life a living hell for EVERYONE if that happens.
As I watched Iruka-sensei chew Naruto out for his "stupid" technique, I was rather amused. I found myself smiling, as, despite the changes that have happened, there are still things that have stayed the same. Naruto's prank that consisted of him defacing the Hokage Monument (Mountain—whatever) being one of them.

Sasuke went home alone after classes, since Iruka-sensei had to take Naruto over to clean up the mess he made during class. The rest of us scattered, going back to our respective homes. Tomorrow was going to be a big day and it was best to prepare for it. I was nervous and was currently taking it out on the practice dummy that Chōza had gotten me so I could practice my taijutsu, of which has improved immensely over the years. It was on par with my shurikenjutsu. Everything else about me was average or slightly above average (not really much of a difference).

I knew I was going to pass my exam tomorrow—I just know it. I could pull off the Bunshin no Jutsu, so that's one way to know that I'm definitely passing. If things are going the way it did in canon, then that meant everyone, save for Naruto, was going to pass tomorrow.

Of course, that was only the first part. Depending on how well you did after team placement and whether or not you passed the exam your Jounin-sensei gave you and your teammates, it could determine your future career as a shinobi. There are currently three outcomes, the first being you pass and make it to the next level as an official Genin. The second outcome is failing, but still showing enough potential to earn another shot at trying again. It usually ends with Genin being sent back to the Academy for another year (or at least until the next graduation exam). And then there's the last outcome, which basically puts you on D-rank missions for the rest of your life, because you are considered unfit for the shinobi life.

Technically, you are still a Genin, but an unofficial Genin. It's not exactly the best title to have, but official Genin are expected to eventually become Chuunin, so there's a lacking pressure of that sort as an unofficial Genin. It's like high school students and college—holy shit, it's exactly like high school students and college (or university, if you want to go that route). I'm gonna need a moment because I don't need this comparison screwing with my mind.

Holy fuck, it's been right in front of my face this entire time!

Still, official or not, you're still expected to put your life on the line, should the situation call for it.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, after all...

Once I was done nearly obliterating my practice dummy (I might have lost control of my strength a few times while I was in the moment), I settled down onto the patio with Chōji, who was eating daifuku with green tea. Mama had made us daifuku for the occasion, considering tomorrow's graduation exam.

I appreciated the gesture, especially since I have a penchant for daifuku—green tea flavored, especially. Though, I'm good with the typical red bean paste filling…i just like daifuku in general.

"So how do you think we'll do tomorrow?" Chōji looked at me before biting into his daifuku.

"I can see us passing—is that good enough?" I asked before swiping one of Chōji's daifuku off the plate. "Mine!"

Chōji seemed a little annoyed, if only because I could've gone to Mama for my own plate, but I was lazy.

Chōji chewed a few times before swallowing. "You seem nervous…what's up?"
Well, there's no hiding anything from Chōji. "I'm worried about Naruto—like is he going to pass or not?"

Chōji frowned. "Ah, I see…well, all we can hope is that the Bunshin no Jutsu isn't on the exam."

"Heh, yeah, that's true…" I stuffed my mouth with daifuku after saying that. I'd rather not talk anymore for the rest of the night. All I can really wonder is if things will play out the same, even though things have changed.

I sure hope they do—if only for the sake of consistency. By the end of the night, the two of us could be found sleeping together on the patio.

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As expected, everyone but Naruto passed the exam the next day. Naruto was really depressed to see all of us wearing our hitai-ate that we were given upon passing the test. It was probably best to leave Naruto alone after all of this, but we really couldn't leave our friend alone.

Hinata was the first to take her hitai-ate off—for Naruto's sake. Slowly, one by one, the rest of us did the same. Afterwards, Shikamaru was the first to suggest that we could all stay on the Genin Reserves so we could wait for Naruto. Naruto starting crying after hearing that and said that it wouldn't be fair for any of us.

"It just wouldn't be fair, dattebayo…" Naruto sniffed. "You all deserve to be Genin…"

"You do too!" Sasuke insisted. "You worked the hardest out of all of us, only for that stupid Bunshin no Jutsu to ruin it!"

"It still won't be fair!" Naruto snapped. "Everyone is waiting to see you outside-tebayo. Chōko-chan, Chōji…your parents are probably going to make a lot of good food because you passed. Shikamaru, Kiba, Shino—you're all probably going to get praised—you too, Akamaru. Same goes for Ino-chan and Sakura-chan…and Hinata-chan?"

Hinata frowned. "Y-Yes…?"

"Your father is waiting for you with Hanabi-chan." Naruto wiped his eye on the back of his sleeve. "Your father never does that—it's always Neji-san or Natsu, who is out there. It wouldn't be fair if you went on the Genin Reserves if your father is willing to come pick you up himself."

Naruto made a lot of good points. All of our families were waiting for us outside to congratulate us…and here we were, trying to cheer Naruto up. If anything, Naruto probably didn't want to see any of us.

"Then I'll wait for you!" Sasuke exclaimed. "There's no one left for me, anyways, so it wouldn't matter if I stayed behind!"

Naruto tried to convince Sasuke by saying otherwise—that Kakashi was waiting for him at home. Then Sasuke tried to use the same thing by saying that Kakashi was waiting for both of them. One thing led to another, which soon escalated into a heated argument between the two of them, until…

"Just leave me alone!" Naruto yelled as he ran off, leaving the rest of us behind.

We all tried to follow Naruto, but Sasuke stopped us, saying he would handle it.
"It's an older brother's duty to take care of their little brother...isn't that how it works?" Sasuke looked at us with a smile on his face. "We might not be blood-related, but we're still brothers...right?"

"Right..." By now, Sasuke and Naruto were essentially brothers—reincarnation bullshit or not.

Sasuke ran off after Naruto shortly afterwards, with the rest of us leaving the Academy building to go join our parents. Ino made a comment about how cool Sasuke was, with Sakura just sighing and shaking her head.

"Only you, Ino..." Sakura said with a smile.

Ino grinned widely at Sakura in response. "Do you wanna hang out tomorrow?"

And already, the two friends were planning tomorrow's activities. We all had about a week until team placements, so until then, we had a lot of free time to ourselves. We still had to take our ID pictures and register, but we had all week to do that. At the same time, this was technically our last week to hang out together before our training with a Jounin-sensei would get in the way. Here's to hoping we all pass the Jounin-test.

... That evening, it was as Naruto had told Chōji and I. There was good food all around in the banquet our parents threw us for the occasion that was our graduation. Relatives joined us at the table, each one of them congratulating us on our accomplishment. As for Chōji and I, we were too busy stuffing our faces with food. It was not often that we had all of our favorite foods available to us on the same day. And there was something about the intention behind the food made for us that made it taste even more delicious than usual.

We talked a lot with the rest of our relatives, with the past being brought up in ways that made Chōji and I remember some embarrassing moments. A few times, I was told that I should probably cut my hair.

"Should I cut my hair?" I ended up asking Chōji.

Chōji swallowed his mouthful of food and gave me a few pats on the back. "It's up to you! It's your hair, after all."

I guess that is true...I've managed this long with its ridiculously long length. I guess I'll just wait and see how much longer I'll be able to put up with it.

Maybe one day...

It was a good day overall—though I was soon brought out of my good mood during the middle of the night. I had dozed off shortly after Chōji and I had hit the futon. Speaking of Chōji, he was laying in the futon right next to me, snoring away as he dreamed peacefully of better days. I sighed as I stared at the ceiling, wondering what exactly I was doing—just being here.

What am I doing with my life?

I don't even know if Naruto managed to get tricked by Mizuki, which would have kick-started the events that would allow Iruka-sensei to pass Naruto. Wait—if Sasuke is with Naruto, then would that still happen?

Fuck!
I don't know… I'm starting to feel sick from the anxiety eating away at me—just gnawing at me, little by little. There is so much that could be prevented by one little thing and I have no idea what exactly that could be because I am not omniscient. I kinda wish I was, if only to ease some of my nerves…

An hour passed and I was starting to feel restless.

*I can't take it any more...*

I needed to go—so I got up and left. It was a good thing I was too tired to change out of my clothes, or it could have made my job of sneaking out of the Akimichi compound a little more difficult than it already is. Still—it was nerve-wracking, just sneaking out of the compound by itself. Every little sound I made sounded a lot louder than it probably was.

*It's like trying to sneak into the kitchen when your parents are asleep.*

Once I was completely out of the compound, I let myself sigh loudly in relief. Afterwards, I started running. I *needed* to find Naruto. It was the only thing that could probably take this burdensome load off my shoulders.

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He wasn't home—and neither was Sasuke. I nearly had a heart attack when Kakashi caught me sneaking around Naruto’s house—especially since he grabbed me by the back of my haori and lifted me off the ground without any freaking warning. Kakashi wasn't in the best of moods *at all* to deal with any of my potential shenanigans and demanded to know where Naruto and Sasuke were, because if there was anyone who might've had an idea of where the two could be, it was me.

"I don't know—I thought they were with you!" I found myself nervously answering Kakashi’s question. My heart was racing and the palms of my hands were especially sweaty—which honestly does not pair well when your hands are wrapped in cloth bandages.

Kakashi stared at me for one *loooong* moment, his only uncovered eye completely focused on me. I was sweating bullets by the time Kakashi decided I was telling the truth and put me down.

"Sorry for scaring you like that—it's just they haven't come home." Kakashi sighed. "What could have happened?"

"Naruto didn't graduate!" I suddenly blurted out.

"Naruto didn't graduate!" I suddenly blurted out.

Kakashi blinked. "...Ah, that explains it. Well, so long as Naruto doesn't do anything stupid, I don't mind that he's out this late. So long as he comes back safely, then I'm fine."

Damn, Kakashi can be scary… my heart is still pounding. "I'll be sure to tell him that when I find him... what about Sasuke?"

"I just want the both of them back in one piece." Kakashi then ruffled my hair and escorted me out of the house. "Try not to get caught. You earned that hitai-ate for a reason—now go prove it."

Kakashi closed the door behind me after that. I took a moment to calm my pounding heart before running off to search for Naruto and Sasuke. It was going to be a long morning today, at this rate. It was past two in the morning—maybe almost three. The morning air was chilly—enough for me to see my own breath when I exhaled, but it didn't really bother me that much.
If anything, it distracted me for a couple of minutes before I realized I had something else to do, so I stopped pretending that I was smoking (like the immature brat I am) and went on my way, looking for Sasuke and Naruto. I stopped at the top of a tree to look at my surroundings, taking the time to adjust my scarf and glasses while I was at it. Still no sign of the Uchiha and blond-haired knucklehead (I mean that with love). I froze for a second before diving back into the tree, to hide myself within the leaves.

I barely managed to hide in time as a couple of shinobi passed me. They were frantically searching for something (or rather, someone) and I'm only amazed that they haven't spotted me. I probably got lucky that neither of them were sensors and that I somehow managed to bullshit stealth. Be still, my beating heart—this is only the beginning.

Once I was sure they were gone, I got the hell out of dodge and continued my search. I managed to keep myself out of sight, but thanks to my near encounter with those shinobi, I was able to confirm that something was up.

Naruto still managed to steal the scroll…but Sasuke might be with him. That served as a divergence of sort, depending if that was the case. Of course, it was the only thing that could have explained Sasuke's absence at Naruto's house. I mean, why else would Kakashi ask where both of them were?

Ugh, I still have goosebumps from that. Kakashi was a bit of a Papa Wolf, despite his typical lax nature around any of us. Then again, he has been watching over us since we were at least five years old. I mean, he had to have been watching Naruto for quite a long time now. It's safe to assume that Kakashi grew attached to us during his time as Hound.

Aww, he does care about us!

A couple of hours passed and the sky was started to lighten up as dawn approached. I still haven't found Naruto and Sasuke yet, but I had a near encounter with a couple of Jounin, of whom Nara Shikaku was with and just when I thought the coast was clear, I found myself immobilized by the Kagemane. It was easy to tell what it was, based on the usual familiar feel of the technique being used on me. I will never get used to it.

It's like being wrapped in string made out of a spider's silk—it is not pleasant. And neither is the sensation of having your body involuntarily moved.

"What are you doing out so late?" Shikaku asked me upon bringing me out of my hiding spot.

"I'm looking for Naruto and Sasuke!" I had nothing to hide at this point and like hell I'm gonna get anything past Shikaku! "Kakashi-san said they haven't come home yet, so I went out looking for them."

Shikaku stared at me for a couple of moments before releasing me from the Kagemane. "Very well—but don't get caught. Your father won't be happy to see you out and about at these hours, and Inoichi might decide to question you much more than he should, so be more careful."

"Y-Yeah!" I nodded my head and dashed off as fast as I could. I got really lucky that Shikaku was the way he is. Though, the fact that my father was out and about this late at night just brought to my attention that my father's stealth skills were definitely a whole lot better than mine were. Bluh, I have a lot to learn…

The sun was starting to rise by the time I came across whom I have been looking for this entire time—Sasuke and Naruto. Iruka-sensei was with them, injured, but otherwise, fine. And Mizuki was looking quite worse for wear when I nearly tripped over his unconscious heap of a body on the
ground. Damn, Naruto beat Mizuki up good.

*Mmm whatcha say…*

"Ch-Chōko-chan!" And I've been spotted!

"Naruto! Sasuke! Iruka-sensei!" I ran over to join my friends and former sensei (soon to be former, anyways). "What the hell happened here?!

Naruto laughed nervously as he rubbed the back of his head, my eyes soon focusing on the hitai-ate that had replaced his goggles. I blinked a few times and looked at Sasuke, gesturing at my own hitai-ate (which I wore around my neck), to which he smiled and nodded his head. I looked at Iruka-sensei for a confirmation and all he did was ruffle Naruto's hair.

"He graduated—that's what happened." Iruka-sensei smiled, grimacing a bit afterwards. "H-Hey, what brings you here this early in the morning?"

"I've been looking for these two this entire morning!" I looked sternly at Sasuke and Naruto. "You two really worried Kakashi-san—he nearly gave me a heart attack when he caught me sneaking around your house, Naruto! What the heck?!

"Why were you looking for us anyways-ttebayo?" Naruto looked questioningly at me.

That…was a good question. I sighed heavily and adjusted my glasses. "I woke up in the middle of the night and…I was worried about you, okay? You didn't graduate and I didn't know what was going on—you just left us so suddenly."

"So you snuck out of the Akimichi compound to look for us?" Sasuke arched his brow at me.

I laughed awkwardly. "Pretty much, ahaha…whoa!"

I froze for a second, Naruto having caught me off-guard when he had wrapped his arms around my body in an embrace. I felt my left eye beginning to twitch when I realized how short I was in comparison to Naruto (it really wasn't that much, but the difference was there). He wasn't short as he had been in canon… Nope, he was taller. He was probably as tall as Sasuke was—maybe even a bit more. He was at least shorter than Shino, who towered over all of us in our circle of friends (sans Neji, who is still the tallest). Meanwhile with me, I only towered over Hanabi.

*Ahhaha, well fuck you too, genetics!*

The only reason it's become a bit of an annoyance for me was because somehow…Naruto ended up not being the shortest out of the Rookie 9. Irony, please, stahp—I can't handle this. Well, at least it made stealth easier when you had less to hide. Ahaha, yeah, I guess that's good…

"Thank you, Chōko-chan…" Naruto sounded touched.

I sighed and returned Naruto's embrace. "Yeah, what kind of leader would I be if I didn't worry about you guys?"

"Ahaha, wait until we tell everyone what happened!" Sasuke grinned widely.

"So…what did happen?" I want all the details. All of them. "Care to fill me in, Iruka-sensei?"

Iruka-sensei chuckled. "How about we talk it over some ramen?"

"Before that, maybe we should take you to the hospital…?" Sasuke suggested.
And that's exactly what happened. Mizuki got apprehended by some Jounin, the scroll got taken back, and Iruka-sensei took us all out to Ichiraku Ramen after we took him to the hospital, to celebrate Naruto's graduation. I found out what happened there, and I was aware that bits and pieces were left out deliberately.

First off, Sasuke had been with Naruto the entire time. He had been there when Mizuki approached Naruto and tricked the blond into stealing the Scroll of Seals, saying that if Naruto can learn one technique within it, he would be allowed to graduate. Sasuke had actually helped Naruto steal the scroll, having been so eager to help him graduate.

Naruto and Sasuke later found out that it was all a trick, as Mizuki had intended to steal the scroll for himself during the occasion that it was out of the Hokage Residence. Then things happened (of the canon sort, with a slight divergence that was Sasuke being there in the first place), and Naruto ended up graduating, because he had learned how to use the Kage Bunshin no Jutsu—wait a second.

"Didn't Itachi-san promise to teach you that move?" Oh wow, my memory can be good when it wants to be.

Naruto was in the middle of slurping up his ramen when I had asked that question. He nearly choked on it before managing to swallow hard. "You're right, dattebayo!"

"Hey, Nii-san promised to teach me after you!" Sasuke frowned. "You better teach me how to use it, then!"

"I'll try…." Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "It was pretty hard to learn…"

"It certainly looked like it," Sasuke remarked. "I mean, it took you so many times that you nearly exhausted yourself."

"Okay, new rule—no putting your health at risk for the sake of training!" Screw that! "I don't want you guys putting yourselves in the hospital before you can even start your shinobi career!"

"Hahahaha, you sure are protective of your friends!" Iruka-sensei chuckled.

I crossed my arms and nodded. "Damn straight!"

"Hell yeah, that's why she's leader-ttebayo!" Naruto exclaimed.

"Our one and only," Sasuke added.

"We should probably meet up with the others after this." It's only fair we celebrate Naruto's graduation with style. "Oh crap, I'm gonna get in trouble because I snuck out of the house at the dead of night!"

Fuck—I totally did that!

"I already sent a letter to your parents." Iruka-sensei patted my shoulder reassuringly. "So don't worry!"

"What about Kakashi-san?" I'm pretty sure he wants to know where his housemates are—oh… "Right, never mind—he told me so long as you two come back in one piece, it's all good."

"Typical Kakashi," Sasuke sighed. "I bet he didn't even notice that we were gone."

Oh, I beg to differ. "Funny you say that…"
I then proceeded to tell Naruto and Sasuke what had happened waaay earlier into the morning. They were quite surprised to hear that Kakashi could even be that scary when it concerned them. It was certainly an eye-opener for all of us…except Iruka-sensei, who just laughed it off, saying that it sounded like typical Kakashi to him.

Typical Kakashi was basically Kakashi being laid-back as ever around us, reading his hardcore smut, being the authoritative figure every once in a while, and making Naruto eat vegetables (even though he was aware what was inside Akimichi clan food—he just liked making Naruto squirm around vegetables). Overall, Kakashi was pretty cool. He was certainly going to be an interesting Jounin-sensei for Naruto and Sasuke.

Near noon, Sasuke, Naruto, and I joined up with the rest of our friends and broke the news to them of Naruto's last-minute graduation. Kiba was ecstatic, Hinata just smiled, Shino nodded in approval, Chōji patted Naruto on the back, Ino gave Naruto a potted plant to add to his collection of plants at home, Shikamaru told Naruto that he was one step closer to becoming Hokage (and that he was closer to becoming his advisor), and Sakura congratulated Naruto. It was all around, a good time to be Naruto.

"I guess this means we won't have to go into the Genin Reserves!" Kiba brought up.

*Bark!*

Akamaru agreed…I could only assume.

"Y-Yes, that's correct." Hinata nodded.

"We still will have to go our separate ways," Shino remarked. "Though at least this way, we will have a higher chance at ending up on the same team with each other."

"Except for me," Sakura sighed. "I'm stuck in a different class than you guys."

"Still doesn't mean they won't add you to our class roster!" I hoped that my comment would make Sakura feel better. "I mean, you know how it is with disproportionate graduates."

"I wouldn't mind being placed on the Genin Reserves, though." Sakura smiled. "It'll just give me more time to continue my medic-nin training! Since I'm a Genin now, I get to advance in my training!"

"That's great, Sakura-chan!" Ino grinned widely. "You are gonna be the best medic-nin Konoha could ever ask for! That's what I see you becoming!"

"M-Maybe you might even surpass Tsunade-sama," Hinata said.

"Oh stop, you're making me blush!" Sakura laughed as a rosy blush tinged her cheeks.

"So which team do you think we'll end up on?" Chōji asked.

Shikamaru rubbed the back of his head. "The Ino–Shika–Chō is a given."

"That's true…but which Chō will it be, though!" Sasuke made a good point.

Ino was quick to latch onto my arm. "I hope it's this one—it'll be good to have another girl on the team! Plus Chōko-chan is really funny when she wants to be!"
Aww, thank you… wait! "Hey!"

"C'mon, your outbursts can be funny at times and you know how to be a good distraction!" Well, Ino does have a point. "You can distract them first, and then I'll strike them while they're distracted!"

"You two girls on a team, though… how troublesome will that be?" Shikamaru sighed.

"Oi." I take offense to that comment. "I would rather not have my gender be considered troublesome."

"I was referring to you and Ino specifically," Shikamaru explained. "I would rather have Chōji on our team, since the most I'll ever have to worry about him is him using the Three Colored Pills—which you, fortunately, will never be able to consume."

"You better make sure Chōji never reaches that decision!" I looked sternly at Shikamaru, taking a moment to jab my finger a few times against his chest. "They may be a last resort, but I would rather the situation never escalate for him to have to use them!"

At least wait until Tsunade is in the village! Until then, don't let Chōji consume ANY of those pills… especially not the last one!

"Likewise," Shikamaru agreed.

"Thank you." I breathed out slowly, trying to calm my pounding heart. Just even thinking about that made me so anxious.

"So are we gonna go out for dango or what are we planning on doing?" Naruto decided to change the subject.

"Dango sounds good!" And so my short attention span makes me instantly focus on food.

"It sure does!" The same happens to Chōji, whose attention span will always focus on food when mentioned.

*I mean, can you blame him? Food is delicious!*

And so all of us paid an Akimichi clan dango shop a visit. Aunt Ryōko made all of our orders on the house, just for the occasion (and for the fact that Chōji and I just graduated), so again, it was a really good day. I was honestly surprised that Anko wasn't around to try and mooch off of us. Where was she anyways? She's usually at this dango shop (specifically, since there are at least five other Akimichi dango shops in Konohagakure) around this time of the day. This dango shop specialized in its mitarashi dango—the dango that shared its name with Anko's surname.

I decided not to think too much about it and enjoyed my chadango.

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"So when are you guys gonna register?" I found myself asking right after we got very comfortable in Naruto's living room, making a pillow fort in the process. It was a very awesome pillow fort, made with a lot of pillows (you wouldn't believe how many pillows we bought over the years, just for the sake of pillow fights, playing the "floor is lava" game—it's used to battle with the lava monster, building forts, or just having a very comfortable floor)... Then Kakashi decided to be a troll and took a pillow that was used as support for the fort, thus causing the fort to collapse as he settled down on
the sofa, using the pillow he took as a backrest. He had just about opened up *Icha Icha Paradise* when we started glaring at him for ruining our fort.

"Maa maa, aren't you guys supposed to be registering?" Kakashi tried to change the subject…and very damn well succeeded.

"I'm gonna register tomorrow-ttebayo!" Naruto exclaimed. "Is anyone else gonna come along?"

"I am," Sasuke was quick to answer.

"Same," I said. "I'll be sure to drag Chōji."

"You say it like I won't come." Chōji laughed.

"And *I'll* drag Shikamaru—so don't slack off!" Ino looked sternly at Shikamaru, who just said, "Meh…"

"I guess we're coming along, too…right, Akamaru?" Kiba smiled as he earned a bark from Akamaru in response.

"I-I'll come too." Hinata smiled. "Are you coming, too, Shino-kun?"

"Do you really need to ask?" Shino adjusted his glasses. "I will come."

"I'll make sure to be there with you guys before I have to leave for the hospital," Sakura said before picking a pillow off the floor and using it to whack Ino over the head. "Until then—**fight on!**"

Ah, English…it may be one of our shinobi languages, another of them being sign language, (fuck yeah, sign language!), but for a shinobi language, we sure love to use it just to fuck around. Ahaha, it's just fun and amusing, depending on how good our pronunciation is. It probably also helps with keeping civilians from learning it, as one minute we're serious, the next, we're just fooling around. The lack of consistency with the language can do a lot.

"Oh you bitch!" Ino said before picking up a pillow and throwing it at Sakura's face. "Take that!"

And so a pillow fight commenced, with Kakashi being included, unwillingly though. It at least made him think twice before he decided to ruin our pillow fort. I doubt that'll stop him.

…

…

Come the next day, all of us rushed to register and take our ID pictures. It was a rather tedious process, considering all the paperwork we had to do. Bluh, paperwork…birthdate here, signature there, whatever the crap this is supposed to be—I don't like paperwork.

I suspect our photographer is a retired shinobi, considering the very English-sounding "Cheese!" he said before taking our pictures…heh, looking good, Chōko. You actually look innocent—which shall serve nicely in deceiving people… Of course, I look absolutely corrupted in comparison to Hinata, who is like an innocent kitten in her photograph.

And—OH WHAT THE HELL NARUTO— *Pffft*-ahahahahaha, oh god!"

"I couldn't come up with a good face!" Naruto explained. "I woke up early and practiced making faces in the bathroom, but nothing wanted to work. So while you guys were taking your pictures, I decided on this. Pretty artistic, huh?"
"Pfft…how do you think the Sandaime is going to react?" Oh god, I need air…

"Why don't we go see for ourselves?" Kiba suggested.

…

"Kiba, you're a genius." Why didn't I think of that?

"Awesome!" Kiba pumped his fists into the air. "You hear that, Akamaru? Leader complimented me on my intelligence!"

_Bark_

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About an hour later, the majority of us were crowded around the door to the room Naruto was being interviewed (we all had to go through it and it was as painful as an interview can be—except without the pressure of _not_ getting the job) by the Sandaime. The door was opened just a crack, which Naruto had left opened for us on purpose. Everything was going smoothly so far, with the Sandaime asking Naruto to retake it and Naruto arguing to keep it.

It was at that moment that I felt someone push me forward and I soon found myself crashing through the doorframe, someone having just slid the door wide open, and landing flat on my face. Luckily, not on my glasses, as they were currently who the fuck knows, because my eyesight is shit and my face is getting well acquainted with the floor.

"Fuck…my…life…" My voice sounded muffled as I said this.

"Ch-Chōko-chan!" Naruto exclaimed as he and the rest of my friends all circled around me.

At the same time, a young, boyish voice suddenly yelled out, "Old man! Fight me!"

"Oh, not again!" an older, masculine voice shouted.

I heard a few steps taken forward before hearing the familiar sound of someone falling flat on their face.

_BAM_!

"Owww!" Ladies and gentlemen, meet Konohamaru.

I lifted my face off the floor to look at the eight-year-old boy (who appeared to me as a somewhat blurred figure). I've heard a lot about him from Hanabi, who picks up on a lot of gossip around the younger Academy students. She says that everyone treats him different because he's the Sandaime's grandson. Welp, that's about to change today, if things go according to canon.

"Damn it!" Konohamaru swore. "Who set a trap?"

"Are you alright?" And there's Ebisu, Konohamaru's tutor (he's wearing all black, making him easy to spot). "And there isn't a trap anywhere!"

"Well…then she did something!" Oh you have better not be pointing at me, you rude little boy!

"Stupid!" Naruto exclaimed. "You tripped on your own feet! Don't go blaming Chōko-chan for
something she didn't do!"

"Besides, you made her fall on her face!" Kiba pointed out.

*Bark*

Akamaru was yapping away at Konohamaru in a rather angry tone.

"Umm…does anyone know where my glasses are?" I appreciate your concern, but I need my glasses to see closely.

"H-Here you go, Chôko-chan…" Hinata said as she put my glasses on my face.

"Thanks, Hinata!" I smiled at Hinata before adjusting my glasses. I got off the floor shortly right after, with a little help from Sakura. "Is my face fine?"

"Just a little red, but…nothing too serious," Sakura replied.

"Naruto! Let him go!" Ebisu suddenly yelled. "That's the Sandaime Hokage-sama's grandson!"

Okay, time to start the countdown! Three…two…one—

"As if I'd give a damn!" Naruto yelled before bringing his fist down on Konohamaru's head.

Ebisu did not take kindly to what Naruto has just done to the Honorable Grandson (I believe that's what Konohamaru is usually referred to as), and Sarutobi Hiruzen just looks done.

"Chôko, I need to leave, can we speed things up a bit?" Sakura whispered into my ear.

I blinked a bit and nodded. I reached into my pocket and pulled out small sphere wrapped in paper. I needed to time this carefully and be very discreet about it—oh to hell with it. "Scatter!"

I detonated the smoke bomb and soon, all of us were scrambling out of the smoke-filled room. We were laughing as we left the building, quite happy to have finally gotten out of there.

"It's a good thing I always have a smoke bomb on me!" I make it a habit out of paranoia to keep at least one of them on me. It might be a harmless smoke bomb (a cheap one at it, as well), just used for obstruction of vision and momentary distractions, but it still gave anyone an opening needed for fleeing. It was sure useful in getting all of us out of that room—god, that was starting to get awkward.

I may or may not misuse smoke bombs from time to time…

Sakura left us after that, making her way to the hospital. The rest of us stayed together before everyone looked at me for an answer after Sasuke asked, "What now?"

"Uh…" Don't say anything about food, don't say anything about food, don't say anything about—"Food?"

Dammit.

"Hey, how about we buy a lot of fruit?" Ino suggested. "Mandarins are still in season!"

…

"So…fruit salad?" I'm down for that…wait…I got an idea! "Hey! Let's make something together!"
"Does it involve the stove?" Shikamaru was quick to ask.

"Nope!" If it did, then that meant permission from Kakashi was needed before we could even start. Because Kakashi doesn't trust all of us in the kitchen when the stove is involved… I tack that down as paranoia involving us accidentally setting the house on fire. Kakashi really loves that house… "So anyways, we're all gonna have to split up and get the ingredients."

"What are the ingredients?" Naruto was perplexed.

I thought for a moment, trying to make sure I had everything right before telling everyone what we were going to need. After I had finish telling them, Naruto sped off and yelled, "I got marshmallows!"

"And I'll get the whipped cream!" Sasuke exclaimed as he followed after Naruto. "Wait up, Naruto!"

"Well, I'm getting the pudding!" Ino said, a light blush tinging her cheeks. She really adores pudding. "I'll try not to take too long!"

"I guess Chōji and I are gonna get the canned fruit, then…" Shikamaru rubbed the back of his head. "How troublesome…"

"Shino, Akamaru, and I'll get the mandarins!" Kiba piped up. "C'mon, Shino, we got fruit to buy!"

"I believe they are much cheaper if we go to the fruit stand near Yamanaka Flowers…" Shino was already telling Kiba where they should get the mandarins.

So that just left Hinata and I, since everyone else had already left…We stared at each other for a couple of minutes before Hinata spoke up.

"I-I'll get the milk…Ino-chan is getting pudding mix, right?" Hinata looked questioningly at me.

"That's what I told her." Ino never makes mistakes…well, not a lot of them—I can trust her, okay? "You go on ahead—I'll get the coconut flakes."

Hinata nodded and ran off, leaving me on my own. I sighed heavily and rubbed the back of my head. I really hope that whatever comes out of this is delicious…okay, time to get some coconut!

As soon as I can recall where I can get some…heh, migrating coconuts. Well, I better get going before I start going on about killer bunnies.

…

Okay, something feels really off. Like, really off. I'm the only one walking down this street (kinda unnerving, if only because of the desolate feeling), but it feels as though I am not alone.

…

Oh hell! Don't freaking tell me—time to break one of the rules! I looked back and felt a headache starting to come when I saw a poorly hidden Konohamaru hiding in plain sight via dirt-colored blanket. He did as poor of a job as I had seen in the anime, though that isn't what is bugging me…

What is bugging me, is that Konohamaru is following me, and not Naruto! Just what the hell did I do now?! Okay, calm, Chōko, calm…just ignore him and maybe he'll lose interest and go bother Naruto.
Fast-forward to like an hour later, after I bought the coconut flakes and was currently making my way to Naruto's house, where we were all going to meet up, Konohamaru was still following me and I was still confused as to what brought on this divergence from canon.

"Hey, what are you doing, following Chōko-chan, dattebayo?!!" And hello, Naruto, what are you doing here? I thought you were already home…I guess not.

I stopped walking and turned around to see Naruto pulling Konohamaru out of a bush. I stared at the sight before me and sighed.

"Just bring him along—everyone else is probably waiting for us." I will not be deprived of fruit salad.

Naruto muttered under his breath and threw Konohamaru over his shoulder. "You're lucky Chōko-chan is in a good mood!"

"Heey, put me down!" Konohamaru started beating on Naruto's back.

Naruto made a face and looked at me before tossing a big bag of miniature marshmallows at me. "You carry that."

I barely managed to catch the bag with one hand. "Wh-Whoa…"

"Put me down, put me down, put me down!" Konohamaru shrieked.

"Stop struggling-ttebayo!" Naruto growled. "That's it!"

Within a matter of seconds, Naruto managed to immobilize Konohamaru, using only the blue scarf the kid wore. I couldn't help but applaud Naruto for his actions.

"Nice." Naruto certainly looks pleased, especially since it seemed he learned something after all those years of getting caught by Iruka-sensei. "Okay, let's get going, then…"

"Hey, hey, Chōko-chan…how long have you noticed he's been following you?" Naruto asked me as he hefted Konohamaru over his shoulder once more. Konohamaru was a bit more docile this time around, considering his current position.

"Over an hour, already…I was just humoring him." And trying to ignore the fact that Konohamaru was following me and not you—why isn't he following you, dammit?!

Kakashi arched his brow when he saw Naruto walk into the house, carrying a tied-up eight-year-old over his shoulder. "Is this something I should worry about?"

"So long as it doesn't become a habit, then you have nothing to worry about," I said as I followed after Naruto. "Whoever else is here, come on out so we can get some introductions out of the way."

And so that's how Konohamaru got introduced to everyone else. Konohamaru didn't have to say anything to us, as we already knew his name. This annoyed him to a point, but he stayed quiet about it. I had Naruto untie him, while I took everyone else (sans Kakashi, who was lounging about on the sofa) to the kitchen, where magic was going to take place (aka, fruit salad making).

Fifteen minutes later, I went to check on Naruto and Konohamaru, only to find Kakashi alone in the living room.
"What the?" I looked at Kakashi, who directed me to the backyard.

"You might want to prepare yourself." What do you mean by that, Kakashi? "Just take my word for it, Chōko-chan."

Whenever Kakashi adds "-chan" to my name, I always have to remind myself that he's being serious, if a bit comically. So I guess I should just take his word…okay, time to woman up!

*I'm gonna try to make you proud, Gogo!*

Less than five minutes later, everyone rushed to the backyard after hearing me yell, "Oh what the hell?!"

I had just walked in on Naruto teaching Konohamaru the Oiroke no Jutsu. It had only just come to my attention that Naruto was corrupting the innocence of a child (if they're not yet a Genin, then I can give a damn about it).

"And here's one more child that has had their innocence corrupted by Naruto." Because Konohamaru sure as hell isn't the first, that's for damn sure.

"…Why?" Sasuke looked at Naruto with such a concerned expression. I mean, this was the Sandaime's grandson we're talking about, here. "Why would you do this?"

Naruto looked at Sasuke, blinking a few times as he adjusted his goggles before grinning widely. "Because it's the one thing you can't replace."

That being Konohamaru's innocence…whatever is left of it now, that is.

"I don't see what the big deal is," Kakashi remarked. "It's bound to happen, sooner or later."

"But he isn't even a Genin yet!" I argued. "That excuse is completely irrelevant on him!"

Kakashi looked at me and nodded. "Good point…well, carry on…"

Kakashi walked back into the house after saying that. I snorted, wondering what was even going on his head.

"He still has a point, considering what happened to us," Kiba brought up.

"Not helping!" I snapped. "Look, Naruto, explain because I have no idea what I'm looking at."

"Well, for one thing, Konohamaru is doing a crappy job at passing as a girl," Naruto said before bonking Konohamaru over the head, dispelling the transformation as a result. "Second—"

"He teaches me the Oiroke no Jutsu, and I get to call him, 'Boss,' in return!" Konohamaru grinned at all of us. He almost seemed proud… "C'mon, Boss—let's keep at it!"

"Say, Chōko-chan!" Naruto turned to me. "Do you think he can join us?"

"Join us…?" …Oh, right! Circle of friends…yeah, I guess so. Considering how busy we'll be as Genin, Hanabi deserves to have a playmate her age. "Yeah, he's in."

Konohamaru stared at me for a moment, most likely trying to process what had just happened. Suddenly, his eyes lit up as he loudly exclaimed, "Big Boss!"

I blanked out for a moment. "What the?"
"Did I...hear that correctly?"

"Hey, how come I'm 'Boss' and she's 'Big Boss'?” Naruto scowled at Konohamaru.

Konohamaru grinned. "Because she's YOUR leader!"

"Big Boss…” I repeated. "Why does this make me sound like gang leader or something?"

"Couldn't we technically be considered a gang?” Kiba asked.

Hinata frowned. "O-Oh no, Otou-sama will not be pleased…”

"I doubt he's been pleased for a while after what we did to Hanabi,” Sasuke remarked.

At least Hanabi still has her innocence…for the sake of our lives.

"She's not that bad!” Naruto protested.

Shino adjusted his glasses. "It is difficult for you to say anything when Hanabi-san takes after you the most."

Ino nodded her head. "Besides, for a Hyuuga, she is that bad."

"And if you're confused, try comparing Hanabi to Hinata,” Chōji suggested.

A small bead of sweat rolled down the side of Naruto's face. "I guess you're right-ttebayo."

"Though, it could be worse!” Sasuke tried to be positive. "Instead of Konohamaru, you could be teaching the Oiroke no Jutsu to Hanabi!"

...

"Sasuke?"

"What, Chōko?"

"Never bring up that mental image!"

For our sake, let us hope Hanabi never learns that, or lest we face the wrath of Hiashi.

...

Sometime later, while the fruit salad chilled in the refrigerator, all of us (including Naruto and Konohamaru) moved into the living room and laid down on the floor. As the floor was still covered in pillows from yesterday's failed pillow fort, which escalated into a full-fledged pillow fight, we all got pretty comfortable.

"So...Konohamaru...why are you going after Jiji?” Naruto suddenly asked Konohamaru.

Konohamaru stayed quiet for a moment, before saying, "Jii-chan gave me the name, Konohamaru. I'm named after this village. But no one ever calls me that. Whenever they see or call me, all they see is the Hokage's grandson. Nobody sees me as me—and I'm sick of that."

I rolled onto my stomach and looked at Konohamaru. "So I'm guessing you're also after the title of Hokage, then?"
"A-Also?" Konohamaru repeated.

"If you want to become Hokage, then you're gonna have to defeat me first!" Naruto sat up. "I'm not gonna sit back and let some kid become Hokage before me, dattebayo!"

"Ah…" Konohamaru looked at Naruto in awe.

At that moment, someone knocked at the door. Almost instantly, all of our attention was on Kakashi, who looked at us lazily with his one eye as he sat on the sofa.

"I'll get it then." Kakashi sighed as he stood up and then made his way to the door. A couple of minutes later, Kakashi called out, asking, "Is there any reason why a man named Ebisu is at the door?"

"Oh crap, he found me!" Konohamaru exclaimed.

"Ebisu?" Naruto made a face.

"He's my tutor—he's gonna take me away from you guys!" Konohamaru explained.

"Tell that guy he's got the wrong house, Kakashi!" Sasuke exclaimed.

"It defeats the purpose when he can hear all of you!" Kakashi responded back. "Oh, he's inside the house now!"

"You suck, Scarecrow!" Naruto yelled as he started piling pillows on top of Konohamaru. "C'mon, help me hide him!"

By the time Ebisu came into the living room, Konohamaru was hidden under a pile of pillows. All of us were trying to look innocent as Naruto started reading Shisui's book to us. Ebisu stared at us for a good five minutes before adjusting his glasses and sighing.

"I know he's here," he said.

Balls…welp, time for plan B! "But do you know where, exactly?"

"He probably doesn't!" Kiba laughed as Akamaru barked a couple of times.

"You're gonna have to search everywhere for him!" Ino grinned deviously.

"This is a pretty big house," Chōji remarked.

"He's under the pillows," Kakashi said as he entered the living room.

Konohamaru popped out of the pile of pillows moments after that, gasping for air. "Air!"

"Young master, I believe it is time for us to take our leave." Ebisu looked sternly at Konohamaru. "Come on, let us go."

Konohamaru scowled at Ebisu. "I'm not going anywhere! Take this! Henge!"

And lo and behold, there stood Konohamaru, finally having succeeded using the Oiroke no Jutsu. He used the pillows he was laying on to add some seductive charm to his current appearance. Niiice legs—oh my god, Chōko, stop being a pervert!

I need to rethink my life choices…and it seems as if Ebisu has passed out from the major nosebleed
he just had. Who'd thought that pillows would've done the job? Guess the Harem no Jutsu will have to wait another day to see the light of day…

"Ebisu, not on the floor…" Kakashi sighed. "I want all of you upstairs…now. I'm gonna go get the mop."

We spent the next hour in Naruto's room, coming down only to go into the kitchen to try out the fruit salad in the refrigerator. By the by, it was a success!

"Where has this been all my life?" Ino was blushing as she continued to eat.

"How did you even think up this recipe?" Chōji looked at me. "Kaa-chan never taught us anything like this."

"Eh, I was just in an experimental mood," I replied before shoveling a spoonful of fruit salad into my mouth… I'm really glad this recipe turned out well, since I was going off by memory involving a random recipe I came across in my past life. Of course, I've had enough time to get good at experimenting these past four years (going on five when you include this year). I've managed to recreate a number of dishes, using Naruto's house as a base for these edible concoctions (or inedible, depending whether I screwed up or not—Chōji hates me when that happens). Everyone usually pitches in to help me when I get in the mood to make something. It's a hobby of sorts and it can be really fun sometimes, just doing stuff together. Depending on how well it goes, it might just end up in the recipe book I have at home.

As we continued eating, Naruto talked it over with Konohamaru, informing him on how becoming the Hokage wouldn't be an easy thing.

"I have a lot of people who recognize me." Naruto looked at all of us fondly. "But it still took a lot of work for their families to recognize me."

Yeah, it's hard to believe that our families were once distant to Naruto. Now, we're as close as can be and Naruto honestly has enough connections to support him when he becomes Hokage (not if —when…because we all believe in him).

"So you better prepare yourself," Naruto told Konohamaru.

Konohamaru tilted his head to the side. "Prepare…?"

"To become someone that everyone will look up to as Hokage," Naruto continued. "There ain't going to be any shortcuts! You got that, dattebayo?"

Konohamaru was definitely blushing by now, but he looked away in an attempt to hide it. "Bah… Stop lecturing me as if you're important."

Naruto made a face, but smiled when Sasuke whispered, "Tsun-tsun!" to him.

"I'm not letting you be my Boss any longer!" Konohamaru looked at Naruto and grinned. "From now on, we're rivals!"

"Sorry, but I'm going to start taking my first step as a shinobi come next week." Naruto was referring to team placement day. "But I'll fight with you, one day, for the title of Hokage-ttebayo. Until then, I look forward to it, Konohamaru."

Flash!
Hinata soon found all attention on her, moments after she had used Shisui's camera to take a picture of Konohamaru and Naruto. She stuttered rather badly as she explained that she wanted to add another memory into the photo album. Naruto smiled at Hinata and reassured her that it was fine. When Konohamaru asked about the photo album, Naruto's eyes practically gleamed.

Within the next hour, Ebisu finally regained consciousness. He found us as we were looking through Shisui's photo album, explaining what the context of each and every photograph to Konohamaru.

"And in this one, Itachi-san was annoyed because Shisui-nii was getting right in his face-ttebayo!" Naruto explained.

We all laughed at that. Eventually, it came to our attention when Konohamaru asked about Shisui and Itachi that he had no idea about them. We broke the news to him and Konohamaru frowned.

"Oh…I see…" Konohamaru bit his lip. "I'm sorry…"

"It's fine!" Sasuke insisted. "Nii-san was a hero! He did it because Naruto was important!"

"And Shisui-nii isn't dead, dattebayo!" Naruto closed the photo album. "Hey, do you wanna see him?"

Konohamaru blinked. "Huh?"

Five minutes later, Konohamaru found himself getting acquainted with Shisui's tree. Naruto explained the logic of it, which Konohamaru quickly latched onto. It was around that time that Konohamaru was aware that Ebisu had been watching him, but Konohamaru didn't care. He ran up to Ebisu and explained that he wanted to become a tree when he died.

Ebisu seemed a bit strained, Ino not really helping much when she mentioned her family specialized in that type of business. Sighing, Ebisu decided to call it a day and told Konohamaru that it was time for them to leave. Konohamaru frowned, but understood.

"I guess I'll see you guys around?" Konohamaru looked expectantly at us.

I found myself answering for everyone when I said, "Sure! See you around!"

Konohamaru grinned and waved at us. "Okay, Big Boss!"

And it seems as if some things won't change. Everyone laughed as Naruto demanded an explanation as to why I was still, "Big Boss." It was a pretty interesting day, overall.

…

Following the rest of the week, Konohamaru liked to drop by and pay us a visit before getting dragged off by Ebisu. During that same week, the rest of us spent as much time as we could together until team placement day (AKA, explanatory meeting day). Sakura managed to spend the last few days with us and even spent the night with the rest of us at Naruto's house the day before team placement day.

Come the next morning, all of us walked to the Academy together. Sakura went her separate to her respective class, while the rest of us made our way to Iruka-sensei's classroom. It was sure noisy as hell as Sasuke's fan girls decided to swarm us after we had entered the classroom. It's honestly hilarious how these fan girls once kept their distance away from Sasuke after Itachi left the village,
only to come back once the gossip died down.

Everyone backed off after Ino made her presence known, much to Sasuke's relief. Ino may still be a fan girl herself, but she was quite tame, in comparison to everyone else. As we made our way to our usual seats, Hibachi felt the need to pick on Naruto.

"What the hell are you doing here? Only those who pass are supposed to be here!" Hibachi sneered.

Naruto grinned widely as he tapped his knuckles on his hitai-ate. "Hey, hey, is your eyesight as bad as Chōko-chan's? Can't you see this hitai-ate?"

Hibachi blinked and sputtered upon seeing Naruto's hitai-ate. "Wha—how?!"

"He passed, that's all that matters." I walked up to Hibachi and looked at him right in the eye. "Now how about you scram before I make you?"

Hibachi fled to his friends after hearing my threat. I could be quite scary when I wanted to be…that, or it's the knowledge of my strength that makes everyone wary. I mean, it's hard to forget all those doors I broke, ahaha…

"Man, I really hope you're the Chō that ends up with Shikamaru and me!" Ino said as she wrapped her arm around my shoulder. "We could do so much together!

"That'd be fun!" I smiled.

Shikamaru let out a puff of air. "Not for me."

"Yeah, yeah, we're both troublesome—get used to it!" Ino stuck her tongue out at Shikamaru.

"Whatever happens, happens, then!" Chōji grinned. "I wouldn't mind being with you and Shikamaru."

"Likewise, but I still prefer Chōko-chan!" Ino remarked.

"I-I wouldn't mind being on the same team as Naruto-kun…" Hinata said.

Naruto looked at Hinata and smiled. "Same here, Hinata-chan! I hope we end up on the same team together-ttebayo!"

"I'm good so long as at least one of you is on my team…right Akamaru?" Kiba looked up at Akamaru, who was resting on top of his head. Akamaru barked a few times.

"I suspect they might divide us based on our skills." Shino adjusted his glasses.

"Yeah, you, Hinata, and Kiba would make a good tracker team." Based off of that, there's no doubt that they'll end up being together on a team. "And we already got the obvious Ino-Shika-Chō team."

"Knowing the typical pattern, we'll probably get a Sarutobi as a Jounin," Shikamaru sighed. "I wonder who that could be…"

Oh, I have a good idea of who, but I won't say anything…

"What about Sasuke and me?" Naruto asked. "Sasuke is the top of the class, meanwhile with me…"

"You got good enough g-grades!" Hinata was quick to tell Naruto. "J-Just because everyone calls you dead-last, doesn't make you one."
"Yeah, what Hinata said!" I couldn't say it any better myself. "Everyone knows how well we get along, so chances are, you two will probably end up on the same team, based on your relationship."

"Really?" Naruto was ecstatic.

"It'd be a bad move if they didn't." Of course, knowing the actual reason, what with Naruto being a jinchuuriki and the Sharingan (which Sasuke possesses) being able to keep that Kyuubi under control, it's only logical that Sasuke and Naruto will end up on the same team, with Kakashi as their Jounin. The third member of the team, however, is up to chance…or so I say, as a form of denial.

Today is the moment of truth whether or not my suspicions are correct, in regard to the third member of Team 7. When Iruka-sensei walked into the classroom, everyone quieted down. He congratulated all of us, telling us that we were all shinobi of Konoha now. Insert the clichéd saying about the journey ahead of us has only begun, here. Attach a small explanation about being assigned into a group of three with a Jounin-sensei, there. Add a warning about listening to your team's Jounin just to make a point…

"We tried to balance each team's strength," Iruka-sensei continued. "And without further ado, here are the teams."

I didn't really pay much attention to the first six teams, except maybe taking in relief that I was not on the same team as Hibachi (THANK GOD).

"Team 7 is Akimichi Chōko, Uchiha Sasuke, and Uzumaki Naruto."

I smiled wryly. I knew it…I had started to suspect that I was going to end up on Team 7 about a year ago. I looked at my new teammates, Sasuke and Naruto, the two of them smiling at me, as they were quite content with the team they were assigned. Ino was pouting over the fact that the Chō on her team was going to be Chōji.

"Team 8 is Aburame Shino, Hyuuga Hinata, and Inuzuka Kiba."

As predicted. Shino, Hinata, and Kiba seemed content with their team, with Kiba placing his arms around Shino and Hinata as he brought the both of them in for a group hug.

After announcing the ninth team, Iruka-sensei announced the tenth team. "Team 10 is Yamanaka Ino, Nara Shikamaru, and Akimichi Chōji."

And there you have the Ino-Shika-Chō trio. Ino was pretty bummed that I wasn't on her team, but she sighed and said, "Well, I guess Chōji is just as fine."

"I may not be my sister, but I'll be sure to protect you," Chōji said before eating a potato chip. "And no, you may not have any, Chōko."

I narrowed my eyes at Chōji. "I wasn't even gonna ask…"

Growl…

Shut up, stomach! "I guess that means you won't have to deal with two troublesome girls, huh, Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru smirked. "It's better this way."

Yeah, yeah, Shikamaru…I know how you feel about girls. Your views might be a little old-fashion, but you mean well. "Just make sure to not let your ass get kicked by a kunoichi just because you
don't want to handle such a 'troublesome' opponent."

"I'll make sure that doesn't happen!" Ino said as she patted Shikamaru on the head. "You hear that, Shikamaru? Leader wants you to pull your weight, so I'm gonna make sure that happens."

Shikamaru made a face. "Tch, troublesome."

"You know it!" Ino grinned.

"Okay, your Jounin-sensei will meet with you, here, after lunch!" Iruka-sensei smiled at all of us. "Enjoy your lunch and good luck!"

…

It was during lunchtime that I found out that Sakura got placed on the Genin Reserves. Sakura didn't mind, as she was going use this opportunity to continue her medic-nin train.

"I want to get as much done before I get placed on a team," Sakura explained. "How about you guys?"

"Well, I didn't get Chōko-chan as the Chō," Ino huffed. "But lucky her got Sasuke-kun on her team."

"I-I'm happy for them…Naruto-kun, too," Hinata remarked. "Th-This won't be the first time they've been together like this…remember?"

It took me a few seconds to realize what Hinata had meant. "Right, when everyone was busy, the three of us were training with Shisui and Itachi-san!"

"Heeey, I guess that means it'll be like old times, dattebayo!" Naruto was grinning widely.

"I'll still surpass both of you," Sasuke said with a smirk.

"In your dreams!" Naruto exclaimed.

"Man, it's still gonna feel weird being away from the rest of you guys." Kiba sighed.

"But we will see each other again, eventually…correct?" Shino looked expectantly at all of us.

"Right!" we all said.

This was going to be our last time together as a group. Soon, we'll be like Neji, lacking any free time to spend. Despite that, we are very much aware that it won't mean the end of us. So we spent the rest of lunchtime talking about pointless things—anything, to pass the time before we were called back in to meet with our Jounin-sensei.

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"He's late…" Naruto said as he peered through into the hallway while Sasuke and I sat in our seats in completely empty classroom.

"You don't say…" Sasuke said sarcastically.

"Oi, I don't need your sarcasm…" Naruto glared at Sasuke, who just smirked at him.
I yawned loudly, somewhat drowsy after eating a big lunch. "I feel like taking a nap…"

"Take one—I'll wake you up when our Jounin-sensei gets here," Sasuke told me.

"Still—where the hell is he, dattebayo?" Naruto was annoyed. "Everyone already left with their Jounin-sensei, except for us—and Iruka-sensei went home!"

"Maybe something came up…" I said sluggishly as I began to doze off.

I blacked out for a couple of minutes before waking up to Sasuke asking, "What are you doing, Naruto?"

I yawned and rubbed my eyes before looking at Naruto, who was in the midst of setting up a prank. The classic eraser in the doorway prank—the very first one he pulled off when Shisui introduced him to pranks. I smiled, feeling a sense of nostalgia from the sight.

"Hey, hey—you think our Jounin-sensei will fall for it?" I diverted my eyes on Sasuke.

Sasuke clicked his tongue. "As if a Jounin would fall for something like that…"

I adjusted my glasses, a huge smile crossing my face. "Wanna bet on it?"

"Loser buys the winner their favorite food?" Sasuke suggested.

"Sounds good." Oh, get ready to buy me green tea daifuku…

At that moment, a hand appeared in the slightly open doorway. Sasuke and I leaned over our seats, watching in anticipation as the door slip open and the eraser Naruto had placed land on top of a mop of silver hair belonging to the one, and only, Hatake Kakashi.

There was a small moment of silence, which was quickly broken by Naruto's loud laughter as he exclaimed, "He fell for it! He fell for it!"

Sasuke narrowed his eyes at me as I also started laughing. A couple of seconds passed before Sasuke soon joined in our laughter. Meanwhile with Kakashi, he lifted the eraser off the floor and looked at us, sighing in what could only be described as slight exasperation.

"What's up with you?" I found myself asking Kakashi.

"Oh nothing," Kakashi sighed. "Just rethinking my life choices…"

There were no first impressions—just a sense of familiarity between the four of us. Despite what Kakashi had said, he seemed content to have us along with him. Because chances are, we will be the first team he ever passes…we'll make sure of that.

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap, another long chapter—I AM SPOILING YOU GUYS. Nah, I just like to write, ahhahah…yeah… So the time skip happened (I told you guys!), Chōko is on Team 7, Hanabi is a rebel (as much of a rebel she could be as a Hyuuga), and there be Team Asuma interactions all around—I really had a fun time with that.
And then there's Sakura, who finally had more screen time. Then Konohamaru happened and now I must explain a thing...when Konohamaru calls Naruto, "Boss", he is using the term, oyabun, which roughly translates into boss... It is a bit of a yakuza term, and the reason I'm even bring this up is because of Chōko getting called, "Big Boss." Really, Chōko is actually getting called kumichō, which is another way of saying boss, in the same context (that is, yakuza terminology—the actual translation may differ, but the meaning is the same). But the reason I went with the "Big Boss" as a placement for differentiating both terms...and to convey Naruto's surprise about Chōko's title, given to her by Konohamaru. Still confused, try looking up the yakuza...it's a really interesting subject to read about—then again, I'm a nerd, so...ahah.

And the reason that even came about to be in the first place, was thanks to a reviewer, by the name of Rae_Kid. They suggested it in a comment, and I decided to go along with it, since it was an interesting suggestion. I mean, I certainly liked the income—I got a bit of a Hiimdaisy Persona 4 feel when Naruto confronted Konohamaru about the "Big Boss" thing.

Moving onto the whole official Genin and unofficial Genin, I wanted to add my own flair of how things go on in the world of Naruto and the outcome of that was official Genin being like high school students and college—you're expected to move onto the next level. It certainly explains the reason why Eternal Genin are looked down upon. Unofficial Genin are stuck on D-ranks, which are by far, the safest missions, considering how risky C-ranks can be (how they can escalate, I mean). Of course, they have the comfort of not knowing the pressure of being expected to become Chuunin.

And since Chōko is a bit of a Sakura replacement, guess where Rock Lee's crush shifted? Yeah, Chōko doesn't actually mind, she's more baffled that it even happened because she's no Sakura. And "No romo" literally means "No romance", used indicate platonic intents in relationships. Expect Chōko to use this phrase from time to time.

Chōko is very much concerned about her twin brother's wellbeing and is established to be a bit of a pervert. She is also now the Naruto-equivalent of height in comparison to her friends. Hell, she SHARES his canon part one height (it's in that range), with Naruto being the same height as Sasuke, if a bit taller by a few centimeters. Of course, most of the Rookie 9, the males at least, are the same height, with the exception of Shino, who is the tallest.

And, as always, I have my friend, ChibiFoxAI, to thank, for some of the moments done in this chapter. The part involving Chōko mentioning that Konohamaru is another kid corrupted by Naruto up until Naruto says, "Because it's the one thing you can't replace" and then there is the lovely little comment Kakashi says about rethinking his life choices. Really, I'd be lost without ChibiFoxAI.

I want to do something special, but before that, I want to ask you readers a question on a subject that I have been considering. Would you guys like some POV shifts to focus on certain characters, on how they see certain events? Like, for example, a focus on Kakashi as he rethinks his life choices upon meeting his Genin team...or Konohamaru reacting to seeing Naruto and Chōko—get an outside view of what it appears to others before they become part of the circle of friends. Something like that—basically, getting insight from a character.

That aside, guess which story broke over 20 chapters? This story did! I consider it a huge milestone that only Façade held, until now! Speaking of Façade, I'm gonna try to
update on the day it reaches its second year! I apologize for taking so long, but life got in the way and just... yeah.

Anyways, just suggest away for POV shifts for certain characters. While I'm at it, would anyone mind a shift in POV entirely, depending on the situation, for this story? It has come to my attention that I might have to switch to third-person, in order to portray a different perspective. Again, it depends on the situation, but I'd rather ask beforehand, so as I could make the shift as painless as possible.

I guess that's if for this chapter! I hope you all enjoyed it! I certainly did, so until next time everyone!
Kakashi

Chapter Notes

And now for something completely different—POV shift!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kakashi was at a loss as he stared at his new team. The four of them were gathered at the top of the Academy roof. There was a lacking sense of formality, caused by the fact that these three Genin knew him longer than any other Genin he had been assigned in the past four years. Hell—he knew them longer than the Genin he had failed.

And yet, he still called for introductions (for the sake of consistency), in which the blond-haired Uzumaki had the gall of telling him that he should start first. Kakashi ran his hand through his hair and sighed in defeat.

"I'm Hatake Kakashi." Of course, they've already known that for over four years, but Kakashi wasn't going to say anything. "I have no intention of telling you my likes and dislikes." They probably had an idea of what they were anyways. "As for my dream…I have a few hobbies."

"Is this all you've been telling the other Genin these past four years?" The Uchiha looked inquiringly at him.

Kakashi sighed again. "Since you asked, why don't you go next?"

"I'm Uchiha Sasuke." The Uchiha smiled. "I like tomatoes, onomusubi with okaka, and my friends. I hate people who call my Nii-san a traitor and fangirls who try to take me away from my friends. My hobby is spending time with my friends and training to become the best! And my dream is to resurrect my clan and become a hero, like my Nii-san, Uchiha Itachi!"

It was fairly obvious that Sasuke idolized his older brother, Itachi. Most people would have assumed that Sasuke would have hated Naruto for what had happened, but that was not the case. Honestly, it was impressive how close Sasuke and Naruto were. Mikoto would have been pleased, as would have Kushina, if the two of them had been alive to see their sons interacting the way they have these past years.

"You're next." Kakashi pointed at Naruto, who just grinned widely.

"I'm Uzumaki Naruto!" Naruto loudly exclaimed as he fumbled with his hitai-ate. "I like my friends and ramen—especially if it's from Ichiraku Ramen! I hate people who are mean to me and my friends. I also hate vegetables—shut up, Sasuke! Anyways...my hobbies are pulling pranks and, like Sasuke, spending time with my friends. My dream is to become the next Hokage! And then, have the rest of the people of this village acknowledge my existence, dattebayo!"

Kakashi blinked, feeling almost a sense of déjà vu as he stared at Naruto. He was certainly Minato and Kushina's kid, that's for damn sure…

"I guess it's my turn, now!" the glasses-wearing Akimichi spoke up. "I'm Akimichi Chōko! I like daifuku, green tea, and just food in general. I also like having a lot of friends and practicing my
shurikenjutsu and taijutsu. I hate it when my friends are sad and don't get me started on snakes…"

Ah, yes, the ophidiophobia the poor girl developed as a result from her encounter with Orochimaru. Kakashi wondered if this was something that was going to get in the way of her shinobi career…but then decided he was thinking too far ahead. He hadn't even passed this team yet.

"My hobbies are cooking with friends, being a leader to my friends, and just being with my friends in general…” Chōko paused for a moment and smiled. "My dream is to ensure that all my friends live their lives to the fullest, all whilst doing the same as well! Hopefully…I really just want everyone, including me, to live."

A bit of a selfless and boring dream to have, most others would assume. Kakashi thought it was simple enough for someone like Chōko. Considering what happened to her and her friends over the years, Kakashi could understand why Chōko would just want everyone to live.

Hell, Kakashi wanted everyone to live as well. Too bad most of the people he wanted alive were no longer with him… That's enough of him dwelling on the past.

"I assume you three already know the usual process of recent graduates and their Jounin-sensei?" Kakashi would be more shocked to learn that they didn't, considering how much they pestered him over the years for information.

"We are given a test, if we pass, we become official Genin," Sasuke began. "We fail, we're either sent back to the Academy or, should we fail horribly, we're stuck doing D-ranks for the rest of our lives as unofficial Genin…did I get that right?"

This was why Kakashi preferred to have civilian-born Genin assigned to him. They were so much easier to mess with because of how ignorant they were with this type of information. Meanwhile with these three, they were as well-informed as could be.

"Correct, Sasuke." Kakashi sighed. "I might as well just get it over with and tell you what we're going to be doing tomorrow. Meet me at the training grounds at five in the morning. I suggest you don't eat breakfast, unless you want to throw up. Be sure to bring your tools, or you'll regret it."

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"Anything else?" Naruto asked.

Kakashi reached into his flak jacket and pulled out three sheets of paper. He handed each of them a paper, saying, "The details can be read on this printout. Don't be late tomorrow."

The three Genin just skimmed over their papers as they made their way toward the exit. Kakashi arched his brow when he heard them start talking to each other.

"I'll bring breakfast…” That was definitely Chōko.

"I'll bring a blanket-ttebayo!” That was Naruto.

"And I'll make sure he doesn't sleep in!” And that was Sasuke.

Kakashi sighed for the umpteenth time and tugged down on his hitai-ate. His Genin knew him too well. They didn't know the exact details of the test, but they knew about his habits. Kakashi was tempted to break his usual habits, just to screw with his team, but decided against it. Besides, there were other ways to mess with them.
This team was definitely different from the other teams he had been assigned over the years. Kakashi had his suspicions that Team 7 will not have any problems passing his test. That still didn't mean he couldn't at least get some entertainment out of the three of them.

"Who knows…this might just be fun." Kakashi chuckled.

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The next morning, Kakashi sent a shadow clone to check up on his Genin team while he went on his way to visit the memorial stone. What he received half an hour later, after the shadow clone dispelled itself, was an image of Chōko, Naruto, and Sasuke. The three of them were sharing a blanket as they slept together, under a tree. Empty bento boxes were stacked to their left and a content expression was on each of their faces.

Look at them—not even worried about the possibility he could fail them. Kakashi knew them long enough to know that this was just another typical day for them. Kakashi could see bits and pieces of himself and his late teammates in them. At the same time, differences existed—that being their closeness and their ability to work together without any trouble right from the immediate start. It honestly surprised him how he actually felt a little envious toward them.

"I wonder if that could've been us, Obito…" Kakashi looked wistfully at the deceased Uchiha's name on the memorial rock.

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Kakashi was starting to reconsider his tardiness when he finally decided to meet up with his team, more than six hours later than the appointed time. When it came to their attention that they had less than an hour before the alarm clock was supposed to go off after giving them a specific time in which they had to grab the two silver bells hanging off his fingers, the they were absolutely livid (at least, Naruto and Sasuke were—Chōko just seemed amused). Normally, Kakashi would brush off their threats, as it wouldn't be a problem, but two of his Genin were his housemates. And their threats of messing with his stuff really had weight behind it, since they knew where his stuff was.

Then again—he could always relocate his possessions. Though, it was best not to take any chances.

"I'll just space it out…" His tardiness, that is. "Now what's up with her…?"

Chōko was just staring at him, with a blank expression that usually popped up on her face when she got distracted. That was typical of the glasses-wearing girl, her outbursts usually following right after she noticed she was staring. If done correctly, Chōko could very well catch her opponents by surprise.

Of course, no one was as unpredictable as Naruto, which was definitely a useful skill in the art of distraction. Sasuke…was Sasuke, which was to say a bit predictable, but not too predictable for amusement.

"Where's the third bell?" Chōko suddenly asked.

Kakashi commended Chōko for her lacking outburst and barely suppressed a chuckle that wanted to leave his mouth. "There isn't one. Only two of you will be able to eat lunch and pass this test."
Of course, hunger won't be a problem for any of them, considering the breakfast he was aware they had eaten. It was a smart move, if a bit risky.

"What if we break one of them in half?" And there was Naruto being his unpredictable self.

"Ooh, can I break it?!" And that was Chōko displaying her destructive tendencies…as if the doors didn't suffer enough.

"If you break it, then that means only one of you will pass." Kakashi decided to be a buzzkill. "You have to have a whole bell by noon."

"Figures…I guess I'll take one for the team, then. You two can have them—I'll be passing the graduation test before you know it." And that was Sasuke being his usual self. A little cocky, but he meant well.

Kakashi had been hoping for a little discord, but just who was he trying to kid? These three were childhood friends. They had been through thick and thin, supporting each other whenever the situation called for it.

A good example had been their reaction to the Uchiha Clan Massacre. Back before Naruto moved into his new house, the one Kushina and Minato had left him, the three of them and the others had lived in that tiny apartment room for over three weeks, coping with trauma.

Kakashi had been there a few times when he came across them, screaming in the middle of the night after waking up from a nightmare. He sympathized with them, as that had once been him after he had killed Rin (albeit without the screaming and with hand washing—so much hand washing). He was quite surprised when he decided walk them through the sheer anxiety as they tried to enter the Uchiha compound, the source of their trauma, for the sake of obtaining Uchiha Shisui's ashes. Kakashi was supposed to have kept his distance…but it was difficult when he kept being pulled into their group.

Even now, he was still being pulled along into their antics. So much for the Jounin-sensei formality he had tried to maintain… Hiruzen had one hell of a sense of humor, giving him these three Genin.

"You can use any weapons you have." Kakashi decided to get this test going. "I'm warning you now—you better be prepared to kill me, or else you'll regret it. When I say 'start,' we can begin…ready? Okay, start!"

Chōko didn't waste any time detonating the small smoke bomb she had on herself. Kakashi was aware she always had at least one on her being at all times. He had been prepared to get ambushed, but wasn't too surprised to see that Sasuke, Naruto, and Chōko had used the smoke bomb as a means of escaping. They had used the opportunity to conceal themselves in their surroundings.

Kakashi had to hand it to them—they took him seriously right from the start. Still, he missed the fun that came from Genin underestimating him.

"Oh, well…" Kakashi sighed. "At least they've hidden themselves well…"

Team 7 definitely had the basics down.

…

Kakashi smirked when he caught three shuriken in midair that had been heading toward him. He wasn't too sure where they had come from, but he had an idea of who had thrown them, considering that Sasuke's aim wasn't that accurate. It appears that Chōko has removed her glasses.
"Hmm?" Kakashi had only just noticed a slight tugging on the shuriken in his hand. It seemed as though Chōko attached wire onto the shuriken… Not exactly the best idea, as it only revealed her location…but Kakashi tried to seem confuse, if only to humor her. Though, when he tried tugging on the wire, himself, he found himself pulling in the wire instead of feeling an opposing force.

Faux confusion turned into genuine confusion, leaving Kakashi open momentarily—just enough for a kunai to nearly graze his face, had he not noticed at the last second. Kakashi was definitely impressed by now.

And he definitely needed to use the Kawarimi if he didn't want the array of shuriken and kunai headed his way to hit him. Within seconds, shuriken and kunai embedded themselves into a log, in place of Kakashi. Where he ended up replacing himself was supposed to have been where Chōko was, hidden in the bushes. Instead, Kakashi found Naruto, who he knew had somewhat shoddy aim.

Naruto grinned at him, having noticed Kakashi's confusion.

"Bet you weren't expecting that, dattebayo!" Naruto laughed.

Kakashi arched his brow at Naruto, wondering about the blond's lack of urgency…only for Naruto to suddenly disappear in a puff of smoke.

…

"Ah, a shadow clone." Kakashi should have figured—and he should have seen that Chōko was still close by, now using the Teppōdama on him. Five balls of condense water were heading his way. Kakashi didn't hesitate to jump out of the way.

Of course, then Sasuke popped out of a tree and yelled, "Katon Goukakyuu no Jutsu!"

Kakashi honestly felt a little overwhelmed, but tried not to show it when he barely managed to dodge the flames shooting towards him.

"Suiton Teppōdama!" Chōko called out once more.

Kakashi was quick to look around for condensed water balls, only to notice that none was headed his way. It confused him at first…until he slipped on the now-muddy ground beneath him, moments after he had landed onto the ground. Chōko had deliberately aimed them there…

"Clever little sneak," Kakashi thought moments before he landed flat on his ass.

Thud!

That…was unexpected…and so were the numerous shadow clones of Naruto that were about to dog-pile him if he didn't do anything. Kakashi used one of Naruto's shadow clones as a replacement, jumping into a nearby tree afterwards…only to have yet another close encounter with Sasuke.

"Hello, sensei!" Sasuke said before detonating a smoke bomb.

Kakashi was expecting Sasuke to use the smoke to his advantage, but was surprised that Sasuke had instead used it to escape without a trace. At the same time, it seemed as though Chōko and Naruto had taken the opportunity to hide themselves, moments after Sasuke had detonated the smoke bomb.

"What are they up to…?" Kakashi was at least aware that the three of them were working together. If he recalled, wire was more of Sasuke's thing. Considering what had happened earlier, it wasn't that unlikely that Sasuke had tied wire to the shuriken Chōko had thrown. While the wire might have
revealed their location, Naruto had left a shadow clone as a distraction to throw Kakashi off when he came to investigate their little hiding spot. All of which led to an eventual set up for an ambush.

It was pragmatic.

...

"I like that." Kakashi was actually having fun with this team. They were predictable to a certain point, but with enough room for randomness to keep him on his feet. It was a game of cat and mouse, one that Kakashi had a slight suspicion he was losing.

Of course, Kakashi wasn't going to go down without a fight. So he decided to switch to a more aggressive approach. He already spotted where Naruto was hiding.

...

Kakashi had to stifle a chuckle when Naruto nearly shrieked after he had found the blond, who had been hiding in a tree. Kakashi commended Naruto for being able to conceal himself, despite the very conspicuous color he wore. Too bad Naruto didn't do too well of a job concealing himself, thus allowing Kakashi to find him.

Naruto fumbled to reach into his holster for a kunai or shuriken (Kakashi assumed), but what came out of the holster was another smoke bomb that Naruto detonated at the last second. At this point, Kakashi was growing annoyed with the repetitive use of smoke bombs. He waited for the smoke to clear and sighed in exasperation.

"The clock is ticking!" Less than ten minutes before noon and all they had accomplished was nearly putting him in corners, with the exception of Sasuke, who threw away the opening he had to escape when he had detonated that smoke bomb. "He could've had that…"

At that moment, Chōko called out as loudly as she could, "OI SCARECROW!"

Kakashi blinked and turned his head to see Chōko, out in the open, completely on her own. She was back to wearing her glasses, so she unarmed for long-ranged attacks. Of course, that still left her Teppōdama, which Kakashi did not wish to have hitting him…at all. At only eight years old, Chōko had been able to crack ribs with her attack. At twelve, Kakashi had an idea of how much stronger her attack had become and didn't wish to test his luck against that.

Though, when Kakashi saw that Chōko had a very familiar orange book in her possession, he felt his pulse quicken. Kakashi checked his pockets and quickly realized that the orange book in his possession that he had thought was his volume of *Icha Icha Paradise* was actually a decoy.

"But how—!" Kakashi's eyes widened. He recalled Naruto and Sasuke sneaking around him last night. *How* they managed to swap out his book with a decoy, without him knowing, Kakashi had no idea, but the fact still stood that he didn't have it.

"I'm gonna finally see what's inside this if you don't come over here right now!" Chōko laughed as she flipped open the book.

It was a trap…a rather obvious one, at that. But Kakashi could get in trouble with Chōza for it, if he didn't so something about it. Yeah, there was that…
"Oh to hell with it." If all else failed, Kakashi could just use the Kawarimi with another log to avoid getting hit by Chōko's Teppōdama attack. With that plan in mind, he charged forward in an attempt to keep Chōko from reading his book. He managed to succeed in keeping her from reading the first page.

In one hand, he held his volume of *Icha Icha Paradise*. In the other hand, he held up Chōko by the back of her haori. She laughed as he raised her so that the two of them were face-to-face.

"Genin or not, it still isn't your time." Kakashi could actually care less, so long as nothing traced back to him.

"I will find out one day what's in that book...just not today." Chōko said before quickly detonating another smoke bomb.

Kakashi had noticed there was a pattern with these smoke bombs, and had almost expected Chōko to actually try and take the bells away from him this time around. However, that was not the case as what Chōko had detonated wasn't a normal smoke bomb, but was actually something else. Kakashi realized too late when his body started feeling heavy and his vision blurred that the smoke bomb contained sleeping gas.

Everything went black after that.

…

When Kakashi regained consciousness, he found himself tied up to a stump, watching Naruto and Sasuke eating their lunches, with Chōko passed out on the ground. A couple of minutes passed and Chōko started groaning, having finally woken up. She sat up and started asking about the bells, which Sasuke and Naruto turned out to have had on them.

"Ah, so that was your plan." Kakashi understood now. He smiled when Sasuke, Naruto, and Chōko focused their attention on him. "So...who gets to pass?"

…

…

The answer his team gives him is adequate enough for Kakashi to pass them. Chōko was the one who decided Sasuke and Naruto got to pass, even though she was the one who knocked him out. Years of listening to Chōko made Sasuke and Naruto accepting of her answer, even though they wanted to protest. They were at least relieved to hear that they all got to pass.

"You three are certainly the most interesting bunch I have been assigned," Kakashi said before untying the ropes binding him to the stump. "Now would any of you mind telling me what the point of that was?"

"Teamwork?" Chōko was quick to answer.

"Mission priorities?" Sasuke suggested.

"The dichotomy of good and evil?" Naruto offered.

That earned Naruto a few stares.

"...I am trying to figure out where you would learn that." Naruto worried Kakashi sometimes.
"For once, it wasn't me." The fact that Chōko even said that was saying something.

Kakashi sometimes questioned how such a short, glasses-wearing girl like Chōko even managed to be considered a leader in such a huge group of friends. He recalled her initial reluctance and eventual acceptance. And the only reason the title even came to be was because she first befriended Naruto, which opened the door for him to a life full of human interaction.

... "It really is all because she just befriended Naruto..." Kakashi wondered just what could have happened, had Chōko not befriended Naruto on that day...but then pushed those thoughts aside and focused on his first Genin team. "Hey, come over here. I need to show you something."

... "Do you see all these names carved onto this stone?" Kakashi asked his students after walking them over to the memorial stone. "These are ninjas who are recognized as heroes of this village."

Sasuke seemed to take a huge interest in the memorial stone. He looked over all the names and then turned to Kakashi, asking, "Why isn't Nii-san's name on here?"

"Or Shisui-nii?" Naruto added. "I'm sure he was a hero..."

"Well, in the case of Uchiha Itachi, it's complicated..." What Kakashi couldn't say was that there was classified information regarding the incident that resulted in Itachi's defection from the village. "As for Uchiha Shisui...you have that tree."

And that was Kakashi putting it lightly, because he didn't want anything to do with the mentions of suicide...for various reasons.

"So...I'm assuming there's an ulterior meaning behind what constitutes as a hero in order for one's name to be carved into this stone...am I correct?" Kakashi had to quickly remind himself that Chōko was capable of sounding like an intellectual person. It still didn't make it any less jarring to hear all of that come out of her mouth.

Kakashi cleared his throat. "You are correct, Chōko. The names of my closest friends, including my best friend's, all happen to be on this stone. The one thing they share with all the other people whose names are engraved on this stone is that they were all killed in action."

... "Ah, so you're like us, then-ttebayo..." Naruto's tone was sympathetic.

Kakashi looked up at the sky and thought for a moment. Yes, he was like them...at the same time, he wasn't and he hoped that it would stay like that. Considering how well these three got along, it would just be tragic for them to ever find themselves in a situation Kakashi had experienced in the past.

"Anyway, I would like to make one thing clear before I call it a day for the rest of us." Kakashi rubbed the back of his head. "Those who do not take care of their comrades are lower than trash. You three are not trash...understand?"

Naruto, Sasuke, and Chōko nodded their heads in agreement. "Understood!"
"Good!" Kakashi beamed. "Starting tomorrow, Team 7 will begin its first mission and...that's it."

"So what do we do now?" Sasuke looked at Naruto and Chōko for an answer.

"We could celebrate!" Naruto grinned widely. "Any ideas, Chōko-chan?"

Chōko was about to say something, but her stomach decided to speak for her and growled...loudly. Her face turned a brilliant shade of red as she exclaimed, "Let's eat!"

Kakashi couldn't help but chuckle. "Ha, predictable...by the way, can I have my book back? I know you have it, Sasuke."

Sasuke blinked and smirked. "Only if you celebrate with us!"

Kakashi sighed and shook his head. "Well, what are we eating, then?"

"I'm thinking hot pot!" Chōko was quick to suggest. "And I have a recipe for it!"

"Does it involve vegetables?" Even if it didn't, Kakashi would still buy them...just to screw with Naruto.

"Umm...can mushrooms even be considered vegetables or are they still fungi?" And there goes Chōko starting to overthink things.

Kakashi placed his hand on top of Chōko's head and ruffled her hair, taking in joy for messing up her braid. "For your sake, let's consider them vegetables. Now stop thinking about things."

"Pffft—okay..." Why Chōko was trying her hardest not to laugh, Kakashi will just chalk it up to Chōko being Chōko. For now, Kakashi had some mushrooms to buy (and maybe some other vegetables, because Naruto needed to stop being so picky).

... About an hour later, Kakashi found himself helping Naruto set up the kotatsu in the living room, while Sasuke and Chōko carried the hot pot cooker out of the kitchen. Some of Naruto's shadow clones follow them out of the kitchen, carrying plates, eating utensils, and the ingredients (which were set on a platter). Fifteen minutes later, Sasuke had just finished serving everyone a bowl of rice, the plates had been set, the cooker was turned on, as was the kotatsu, and Naruto was eager to start cooking the ingredients.

"Remember, Naruto...meat balls, first!" Chōko informed Naruto as he was given the "go ahead" to start cooking.

There was a sense of nostalgia that Kakashi felt the longer he observed the events occurring before him. It was almost bittersweet, in that it reminded Kakashi of the times that he and his teammates were invited over to their sensei's house for a hot pot. Kushina would usually do most of the cooking, with Minato reading a book to pass the time. Obito would be halfway done with the bowl of mandarins, thus prompting Rin to take the bowl away from him, and Kakashi would just watch silently.

And here he was, still watching silently, though very much content. Time passed and soon, Kakashi found himself looking up from his reading, Sasuke having returned his book. Food had been eaten, to which Kakashi had managed to do without showing his face (much to the annoyance of his students). Naruto had his back against the floor, having passed out from overindulging on fried tofu, which was now discovered to be another of his favorite foods. Sasuke was struggling to stay awake...
and Chōko had already dozed off, her face resting on the table as she slept peacefully. She was drooling a bit, much to Kakashi’s amusement.

"Maa maa, sleeping under the kotatsu isn't good for you." Kakashi's words garnered no response, save for a small groan from Sasuke before he finally conked out. "…"

So this was his team, Kakashi thought as he resumed his reading. It was so strange…that he actually had a team. It probably helped that there was familiarity between the four of them. It certainly gave him confidence in their potential.

As Kakashi turned to the next page, his thoughts shifted to the days of his past, when everyone he cared for was still alive. His attention focused back on his Genin, the three of them looking so safe and secure.

This team…he will do anything to keep them safe. He'll do his best to guide them and maybe, just maybe, help them all achieve their dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Blaaargh, for a first attempt in POV, it certainly became its own thing! The POV was supposed to have changed for the bell test, but then I got too immersed with Kakashi's POV that it kept going and…yeah. Originality took its toll and you got this.

I dunno, it feels right…and the reason Chōko was laughing after Kakashi said, "Now stop thinking about things" is because Chōko associates the sentence with the Hiimdaisy Persona 4 comic. That aside, through Kakashi's POV, some things have been established. The first thing that has been established is that the house Naruto was given actually belongs to his parents. THAT is why Kakashi really loves that house. Second, Kakashi never meant to get involved in the way he has with Naruto and his friends, but ended up doing so, anyway. Third, Chōko's decision to befriend Naruto had much more of an impact than Chōko could have ever imagined.

Sure, Chōko could have still made friends with Hinata, even without Naruto being there. The same goes for Shino, Sasuke, Itachi, Shisui, and everyone else. But without Naruto, things wouldn't have played out the way they have so far. His absence at Chōko and Chōji's party would have turned out different, for instance. That day alone was confirmed, by Shisui, to have been the cause for change in bringing acceptance toward Naruto.

Itachi had Naruto to keep him occupied after Shisui's death, thanks to the relationship Shisui had with Naruto. And with Mikoto being able to fulfill her wish of her son and Kushina's son being friends, that brought Sasuke and Naruto together. Throughout the years, Naruto had basically become part of the Uchiha clan, which is what brings him even closer to Sasuke after Sasuke had lost everyone. Sasuke understands that Naruto is important because he also feels that Naruto is important.

Naruto being referred to as someone who is important might have just seemed like something Shisui had said, that got passed down to Itachi and then Sasuke, but if you look at it through this context, Naruto really is important. Things couldn't have turned the way they have done without him. So yeah, this is pretty much the butterfly effect at its finest.
All of this can still be traced back to Chōko, who did what she did on her first day of school because of her conscience. Her being leader is almost ironic when you consider that context.

That's enough about that. The POV will shift back to Chōko in the next chapter, when the abhorred D-rank missions shall begin. I SHALL ENJOY THEIR MISERY.

If there are any mistakes I might have made in this chapter, feel free to correct me because I STILL HAVEN'T CAUGHT UP TO NARUTO. Hell, I made it to part 4 of Jojo's Bizarre Adventure and FINALLY got to Killer Queen because, once again, I prioritized Stands over Ninjas. I'm on "Another One Bites the Dust" in chapters, and YES, Queen references GALORE.

I still couldn't take the Stand, Red Hot Chili Peppers, seriously, though…and it turns out that there were MORE Jojo's Bizarre Adventure references in Danganronpa 2 than I had originally thought, the biggest one being Heaven's Door.

ANYWAYS, THIS A/N IS GOING ON LONGER THAN IT SHOULD HAVE. So I'll wrap this up. Thanks go out to ChibiFoxAI for Naruto's, "Dichotomy of good and evil" line. I honestly feel as though that could be a choice for Cards Against Humanity (I am still a horrible person).

That's about it for now, so until next time, everyone!
When I woke up this morning, I felt that today was going to be a good day. I didn't care that I was the last one to wake up, so everyone got to see me drooling in my sleep. I'm more surprised that Kakashi was still with us and not off doing his usual thing, which is visiting the memorial stone and losing track of time. I'm not complaining, though, because that meant Sasuke, Naruto, and I didn't have to wait for him so we can go get our first D-rank mission from the Mission Assignment Desk at the Academy.

Then I found out what our first D-rank mission was. I was not happy, neither was Sasuke, and Naruto was honestly eager. Kakashi was currently talking it out with the Sandaime, probably something that had to do with the fact that he finally passed a team. And poor Iruka-sensei was trying and failing to convince the Sandaime to give us a different mission. Kakashi honestly seemed amused.

Just what was it that we were given? A job babysitting a war veteran's grandson—why the hell are they trusting us with a child?! "Have you not seen what Naruto's done with Hanabi?!"

"Or Konohamaru…" Sasuke added.

Naruto laughed at the mere mentioned of Konohamaru. The Sandaime coughed, most likely having dealt with Konohamaru's recently learned technique.

"I am quite aware what has been done with my grandson…” Unfortunately, Hiruzen seemed to want to say, but stayed quiet. "However, I have already made my decision and it is final. Here is your mission scroll—good luck."

Well, fuck.

…

…

Manabe Masamune was a disgruntled war veteran from the Second Shinobi World War and the Third Shinobi World War. He lost his right eye in one of the wars (which war, Kakashi didn't say), which is the reason why he wears an eye-patch. He works as a blacksmith with his own metal works shop, which was stationed in the house he lived in.

Recent events have left his three-year-old grandson, Manabe Kazuichi, orphaned. Due to the complexity of his work schedule that his profession has given him, Masamune was in need for assistance in caring for his grandson. It wasn't as if Masamune couldn't watch over Kazuichi, but after a close call while working in the forge, Masamune wasn't taking any chances.

Though, I'm pretty sure Masamune was rethinking his decision to request for assistance when he saw that Naruto was with us. He sure didn't seem happy when he gave us the dos and don'ts of watching over Kazuichi. Masamune left to work at his forge after that, with Kakashi following after him—most likely to explain the situation.

That left us alone with Kazuichi, who was just glaring at us. He seemed to be in a much similar mood as his grandfather, though for different reasons…possibly. Whatever the case was, it still didn't
make the situation any less awkward.

"So...I'm Akimichi Chōko!" Let's try to break the ice!

"Uchiha Sasuke." Sasuke gestured at himself.

Naruto smiled widely. "And I'm Uzumaki Naruto-ttebayo!"

"...Manabe Kazuichi..." Kazuichi said after a couple of minutes of silence.

Kazuichi sure didn't like to talk much, but I guess it could be assumed he was just being a shy, little boy...heh, Shy Boy... Okay, that's enough of me reminiscing K-Pop, now let's get to—

"I don't like any of you..." Kazuichi suddenly said.

*Oh, come on!*

...)

"How long are we watching this brat?" Naruto turned to Sasuke.

Sasuke sighed. "We're checked in for six hours..."

"Welcome to hell..." I was not looking forward to this— "OW!"

Kazuichi just kicked me in the shin! That little—

"Oh, you b—" at this point, Sasuke took the initiative and clapped his hand over my mouth as he said, "Now, now, it's not nice to hit girls!"

"Yeah, they can kick your ass-ttebayo!" Naruto nodded his head.

I blinked a few times before licking the palm of Sasuke's hand, thus effectively grossing him out and succeeding in my attempts to get his hand off my mouth. "Bluh, human flesh..."

"Pfft...hehehe..." Kazuichi covered his mouth as he tried to stifle his laughter.

I looked at Kazuichi for a moment and smirked. "So you thought that was funny, huh?"

Well, I sure didn't! You're lucky we're getting paid, otherwise I would've smacked you by now, Kazuichi...

"So what do you wanna do?" Naruto asked Kazuichi.

Kazuichi stopped laughing. "...P...Play?"

"Play what?" Sasuke asked.

Kazuichi looked down. "..."

"Heeeeey, wanna play ninja?" Naruto seemed eager to try and make the day go by faster.

Kazuichi made a face. "How do you play?"

"How about we go to the backyard and find out?" Assuming there is one...and it better be a nice-looking one, otherwise playing a game of ninja is out of the question.
Fortunately, for all of us, the backyard was moderately big and green. There was even a tree with a swing much like the one on the Academy courtyard. After resisting the urge to swing on said swing, I helped Naruto and Sasuke explain the rules of ninja to Kazuichi. He caught on pretty quick and after nearly an hour in which many games were played, Kazuichi ran over to the swing and demanded to be pushed.

Naruto and Sasuke had it in their heads that my strength would make me a good swing pusher. I was…then I overshot a push and accidentally launched Kazuichi into the air. I expected the worst to come right after that.

Sasuke managed to catch Kazuichi before he landed, so no injuries, at least. I bit my lip in anticipating, expecting Kazuichi to start crying. Of course, what happened next caught us all off-guard.

Kazuichi started laughing out loud and gleefully exclaimed, "Again! Again! Again!"

I stared wide-eyed at Kazuichi and looked at Naruto and Sasuke, who both just shrugged at me. I guess we found And so, for the next hour or so, Sasuke and Naruto took turns catching Kazuichi each time I launched him into the air. My heart did not take this too well, as I kept expecting the worst to happen, but Sasuke and Naruto never let Kazuichi hit the ground, so I was extremely relieved for that.

Afterwards, Kazuichi decided that food was more important that entertainment, so lunchtime was a thing and…Sasuke ended up covered in food or rather, the leftover rice from the onigiri I made for Kazuichi (all he did was eat the filling, which was salmon, the punk!). Kazuichi thought it was funny and I was about ready to smack Kazuichi over the head for wasting food, but then Kakashi decided to drop by—just in time to stop me.

"Now, now, Chōko-chan—hurting the client is bad for business! I'm not sure how Manabe-san will react." Translation: Hit the kid and we'll get in deep shit.

I had almost forgotten that Kazuichi was a war veteran's grandson for a moment…and thank god Kakashi stopped me when he did! I don't know what Masamune would have done if he heard I hit his grandson. Bluh, that was a close call…

Though that brings up something I should have noticed, but didn't until now…Sasuke, Naruto, and I have to put up with Kazuichi's shit. And if it means getting covered in food, then oh well! Until our six hours are up, we're this kid's bitch…

"Welcome to hell, indeed..." I huffed as I followed Kazuichi out of the house, while Sasuke and Naruto stayed behind to clean up the mess at the table. Kakashi followed me out, probably not wanting to take chances with my short-temper around Kazuichi.

I should've known something was up from the way Kazuichi wanted me to follow him in a certain direction. Unfortunately, I'm an idiot, so when I fell into the kid's pitfall trap (which was surprisingly well-hidden), I only had myself to blame for not suspecting anything—I'm a fucking Genin, for crying out loud! I'm extremely lucky that it was a child's trap I fell for!

Still don't appreciate the muddy landing I had when I fell into the pitfall…and great, look at all those leaves in my hair…I'm gonna have one hell of a time cleaning up after this….at least my glasses are clean…
How the fuck did a three-year-old child even managed to create a pitfall that deep?! I'd honestly be impressed if I wasn't pissed off at the fact that I let myself fall into the kid's trap... Welp, it at least looks like Kazuichi will have the makings of a future shinobi. Meanwhile with me, I should honestly pay more attention where I'm headed.

Before that, I should probably crawl out of this stupid pit, first and—stop laughing, Kazuichi!

"Ahahaha, I still can't believe you fell for it!" Kazuichi was laughing so hard, he was crying. "Jii-chan never falls for it!"

Oh, you better not be comparing me to a war veteran, little boy! "Your grandfather is a Tokubetsu Jounin, you jerk!"

"Whaaat? I can't hear you from all the way up here?!" Oh that ass—he's mocking me!

"When I get out of this pit, we're gonna have some serious words!" Too bad I can't even make it a couple inches climbing up before falling down!

SPLAT!

Oh god, I got mud in my eyes that time! And my glasses—I don't even know where my glasses are! I can't see shit! Uuurrrgh...why the hell am I doing this?! Just what am I doing with my life to earn this sort of treatment from a fricken' three-year-old?! This isn't fair...and I can't do anything about it because I'll get in trouble and...ugh! I can't take this anymore...don't cry, don't cry, don't cry! "S-S-Seeeenseiiiiii—uuuuwaaaaaaahhhhhhh!"

...

"I-I'm s-sorry, N-Nee-san..."

"Don't touch me..."

My body is trembling, my head is pounding, my emotional stability is in shambles—I am not okay! I need a moment...

"It's not nice to make people cry, Kazuichi..." Kakashi said as he cleaned out the mud in my eyes with a damp washcloth. "Chōko can only endure so much..."

You better fucking believe it! I do not take well when I'm pushed into a corner that I can't fight my way out of...it just makes me feel helpless and I don't like feeling helpless. Though, I really do appreciate that Kakashi got me out of that pit the immediate moment he heard me cry... Still can't see...

And now I have to deal with Naruto and Sasuke, who are both overreacting to hearing me cry. God dammit, I can't even have a simple breakdown without—actually, never mind, forget that train of thought, Chōko. Appreciate what you have and—oh god, Kazuichi, please let go of me.

"I'm r-really sorry, Nee-chan..." Kazuichi had just latched onto my legs and was hugging them. "I didn't m-mean to make you cry..."

Oh god, genuine apologies from little kids—my one weakness. I still couldn't see, not yet...but if I could, I would have patted Kazuichi on the head. Instead, I just said, "It's fine...just don't do it again...please."

"I won't." Kazuichi sniffed.
That'll do, kid…that'll do.

Kazuichi became quite amicable after that. He wasn't as much of a little shit as he had been earlier, much to our relief. He still held an interest in traps, which Naruto was quite quick to pick up on and just—those two got along. Sasuke and I actually took the time to take a break while Naruto kept Kazuichi entertained…then story time happened and everyone, except Kazuichi, looked to me for a story.

Times like these, I really regret being quite the bookworm. At the same time, I also regret having memories of my past life because for the next half, I ended up telling what could be considered a reimagining of a typical Disney animated film. What is my life? To be recounting past memories under the guise that I had weird dreams for the sake of entertaining a child?

It just only made me realize I had no originality (I AM A SHAM)…but Kazuichi didn't seem to care, as he was having the time of his life hearing what I had to say. Even Naruto and Sasuke were into it. And, try as he may, Kakashi was actually diverting his attention away from *Icha Icha Paradise*.

God damn, is the concept of a magical flying carpet too surreal for people who live in a world where we can do many things, such as shoot fire from our mouths?! I don't even know…

"Again! Again! Again!" At least Kazuichi is happy, based on the wide smile on his face and—holy shit, look at those teeth!

Had it not been for Masamune entering the room at that time to tell us our job was over, I would have ended up blurt out something that would have probably come off as insulting toward Kazuichi. Thankfully, Masamune's gruff-sounding voice caught me off-guard as he said, "Well, I'll be damned. That's the first time I've seen the brat smile in months."

"M-Months?" Are you fucking kidding me? "Months—who doesn't smile in months?! I mean, it's not like there's anything wrong with not smiling, people have their reasons and all, I just think it's absurd to keep such a cute smile hidden—" Oh my god, Chōko, shut up! "I mean, I think it's cute and—uh, I'm gonna stop talking now…"

I don't think my face could be any redder. The embarrassment burns and the tears are starting to come. I should have just kept my mouth shut, but nooo, I had to say all of that. What is wrong with me? I just hope I didn't annoy anyone with what I just said…

"Y-You think my sm-smile is cute?" I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel as if someone had just punched me in the gut when I heard Kazuichi asked that question. "You don't think its freaky, right?"

"Why would I think that?!" Oh god, what the hell has happened to make you even think that, Kazuichi?!

"It might be hard to believe, but children are prone to rejectin' others based off of appearances," Masamune explained. "Some are subtle about it—others are not. Kazuichi doesn't go out anymore because of them."

I wasn't that surprised to see Naruto looking sympathetically at Kazuichi after hearing all that. Naruto would know what it meant to be rejected…
"They called me f-freak and wouldn't let me play with them because of my t-teeth…" Kazuichi frowned. "Wh-Why are they so mean? They're just teeth…teeth that I don't want."

"That's enough!" Masamune snapped. "Yer teeth are nothin' to be ashamed of! Look at me—ya don't see me hidin' my teeth!"

Fucking hell, I was not expecting Masamune to be sporting the same set of shark teeth his grandson had! Though, it did explain where Kazuichi got his teeth from, with the way genetics work and—stop being a nerd, Chōko!

"Your Kirigakure heritage is definitely showing itself, Manabe-san." Kakashi sighed. "Not saying that there is anything bad with it, but if I recall, others questioned your loyalty because of it during the Third Shinobi World War."

"Yeah, that did happen…but they stopped givin' me crap after I lost an eye for 'em." Masamune huffed. "Paranoia can sure be an ugly thing, though…I'm just glad it isn't like it used to be."

I…am learning a lot of things right now…just from listening in on this conversation. Apparently, Masamune is from Kirigakure or at least, is of Kirigakure descent, which would explain the sharp teeth he and his grandson possess. Considering the teeth that most characters from Kirigakure possessed (characters such as Hoshigaki Kisame, Momochi Zabuza, and Hōzuki Suigetsu, for example), I guess it's safe to say that sharp teeth are a trait that exists in the village's gene pool. Also, found out which war Masamune lost his eye in.

"I probably shouldn't be sayin' this to ya, but be glad that people ain't questionin' yer loyalty, Kazuichi," Masamune said as he ruffled his grandson's black hair. "Words can hurt, but distrust hurts even more…ya got that?"

Kazuichi looked up at his grandfather and nodded his head. "Got it, Jii-chan…"

Masamune smiled upon hearing his grandson's response. "Now why dontcha smile for the little lady? She seems to like yer smile. Be proud of it for once."

Kazuichi blinked a few times before looking at me. He stared at me for a moment before grinning widely, his shark-like teeth very much visible. His smile was contagious, as I soon found myself smiling back at Kazuichi. He really did have a cute smile…

…

For our first D-rank mission, babysitting Manabe Kazuichi could have gone wrong in so many ways. Fortunately, for us, it went well, despite the differences we all had initially with Kazuichi. For a kid who said he hated us right from the start, he sure was quite emotional to see us leave. I was almost sad that our mission was over…almost.

To be honest, I'm just glad that we managed to even finish a D-rank mission…because let's just say that it's quite possible to actually fail a D-rank mission. And yes, I should know because Hyuuga Natsu had pretty much confirmed that when their Jounin-sensei, Mimura Hamaki, had his name put down as one of two Jounin-sensei who have ever managed to fail a D-rank in the entire history of Konohagakure. Who was the first?

Apparently, whatever team Umino Iruka was assigned to during his pre-instructor days, with a Jounin-sensei who was banned from ever taking on another Genin team because of the shenanigans they and their Genin team had caused. The sheer irony that Iruka, of all people, had been on such a team, was hilarious.
That aside, I was hoping that after we returned to the Mission Assignment Desk at the Academy to turn in our mission scroll and receive our pay that that would be all for today. Because Sasuke and me—especially me—needed a bath. Unfortunately, Kakashi decided that we were still capable of doing a couple more D-rank missions.

So for the next four hours, Naruto, Sasuke, and I were stuck doing minor chores, such as weeding a garden, in which I was quite glad that our time with Ino and my knowledge with plants left us able to distinguish what was a weed and what wasn't. Painting a fence was another, which was a pain in the ass. Picking up trash in the park was something I wasn't expecting because the trashcan was fucking there, so how the hell did the park get so dirty with trash?! And our last mission of the day, washing dishes at an Akimichi clan restaurant...so many dishes.

Sasuke and I didn't really get a chance to take a bath until after we received our pay for our last mission of the day. By then, Naruto was just as dirty as we were from when we were weeding the garden, picking up trash in the park, and even washing dishes, because someone (*cough*Sasuke*cough*) had to slip on a fallen bar of soap and drop food-covered plates on Naruto. We were only lucky that none of the plates had been broken, otherwise that would have seriously docked our pay...

And Kakashi did nothing, but watched us suffer, the bastard! I was seriously in a bad mood by the time I returned home—my home at the Akimichi compound. I would have stayed with Naruto, Sasuke, and Kakashi, but I'm pretty sure my parents and Chōji want to at least hear what happened the other day after I had left so early in the morning.

I spent some quality time with my parents and brother after I arrived home. I talked to them about what happened the other day and today's D-rank missions—oh right, I'm an official Genin, that's a thing, ahahaha...

I wasn't that surprised to hear from Chōji that he, Shikamaru, and Ino were also official Genin. Their Jounin-sensei was Sarutobi Asuma, as predicted, and their test had been to work together to incapacitate Asuma, using only their respective clan's hidden techniques. It was basically a test made specifically for the new Ino-Shika-Chō team.

"So how did your D-rank missions go?" I found myself asking Chōji as I braided my hair. The two of us were now in our room, just killing some time before going to sleep.

"Oh, we don't start those until next week," Chōji replied as he opened a bag of chips. "Asuma-sensei wants to train us a bit before we start any D-rank missions."

..."Chōji, you really suck sometimes." I puffed up my cheeks in annoyance. I was hoping to have someone to relate to after today's hell!

Chōji just laughed and held out the bag of chips in his hand. "Chip?"

I pouted for a moment before snatching a couple of chips from the bag. "Sure..."

I really can't stay annoyed at my own brother for too long...

..."

The next day started off rather well. Kakashi was still at home with Naruto and Sasuke, so when I
arrived, we immediately left for the Academy to pick up our first mission of the day from the Mission Assignment Desk. I was expecting a different set of D-rank missions...what we got instead was another babysitting job. This time, Team 7 was specifically requested for it by Manabe Masamune, yesterday's client.

And so there went another six hours babysitting Kazuichi, who was quite happy to see us. He was at least behaving better than yesterday, but he was still a little shit when the opportunity came up—such as when he was being picky with his food. Kazuichi was quite the carnivore and refused to eat anything that didn't consist of meat. I didn't really think much of it at first...until after full week of babysitting the kid. A full forty-two hours out of a week spent watching over Manabe Kazuichi... plus twenty-eight hours spent on doing other D-rank missions. It was a pretty tiring seven days (seven days...), and I was starting to grow concerned about Kazuichi's obsession with meat. So when I brought up this concern with Masamune, he just waved it off, saying it was a phase.

"How do you know?" I shouldn't be prying, but I'm honestly curious.

"Because his father and uncle were the same way when they were his age," Masamune replied.

I see, I see—wait... "Uncle? You mean there are more of you?"

Wow, Chōko...you could have totally worded that question better than that.

"I expected that to come out of Naruto's mouth, not yours." I know, Sasuke, I know.

"Hey!" Naruto exclaimed.

"I apologize on behalf of my student, Manabe-san." Kakashi sighed. "She's prone to saying things without really thinking."

"Nah, it's fine..." Masamune reassured. "And to answer yer question, yes...there are more of us. You think Kazuichi is the only brat I'm a grandfather to,?

Silence...

Masamune let out a puff of air. "I guess it wouldn't be that obvious, since my other son took on his wife's surname... He's Munehisa Iwai, the man currently running the Munehisa weapons shop. If you haven't met him now, you will eventually when you need to stock up on weapons."

I'll keep that in mind... 

Kakashi called it a day after that, much to our relief. I was honestly getting tired of those damn D-rank missions. They. Suck. Ass...like so much, it isn't even funny...

Well, it is to Kakashi, who was still enjoying our suffering...the fucking sadist. Speaking of him, he went off to god knows where (probably staring at the memorial stone—I honestly think that's a coping mechanism for his trauma and loss), while Sasuke, Naruto, and I just spent the rest of the day, laying on the pillow-covered floor in the living room at Naruto's house.

"Why?" I found myself asking.

"Because we are Genin..." Sasuke sighed.

"Imagine if we weren't official Genin, dattebayo..." Naruto remarked.
We all visibly shuddered at that thought. After a week's full of D-rank missions, we had everything to hate about them… We still haven't had our encounter with Tora, the demon cat of Konoha, so I guess we could consider ourselves lucky. Still, even with Kazuichi being probably the highlight of our D-ranks (he was the only thing making our jobs easier for us), it still wasn't enough to cancel out the four extra hours' worth of D-ranks Kakashi made us take after babysitting the kid.

Unfortunately, for us, today was our last day babysitting Kazuichi, as Masamune had finished this month's quota's worth of forging. That meant those four hours were now going to turn into a full ten hours, of which were all meant to be spent doing miscellaneous D-rank missions. Just thinking about it made me want to scream into a pillow—which I did.

"I'm gonna die of boredom-ttebayo…" Naruto rolled onto his stomach. "Hey, you wanna get some ramen?"

_Growl…_

"Do you even need to ask?" Kinda wished my stomach would stop talking for me, though!

Sasuke sat up. "We got paid, so we can splurge today…"

"Excessive spending, here we come!" I am so ready to spend some money today and—wait a second… "Sasuke, you still haven't paid up for losing that bet."

"Green tea daifuku?" Sasuke looked at me.

I grinned. "You know it."

"Can this wait after ramen?" Naruto asked as he pulled out Gama-chan from under the sofa.

"Naruto, why do you even keep Gama-chan under there?" I felt the need to ask.

"Because no one ever suspects the money to be under the sofa-ttebayo," Naruto said as if it was obvious. "Now are we gonna eat, or what?"

"Sure, let's go." My stomach is starting to annoy me— "Stop growling, stomach—ow!

Sasuke…did you just poke me in the forehead?

"You need to stop talking to your stomach," Sasuke said as he stood up, not even caring that he just finished poking me in the forehead like Itachi used to do.

I continued to stare at Sasuke for another minute before deciding to ignore what had just happened. I'm too hungry for this shit…

Chapter End Notes

AND SO BEGIN THE D-RANKS!

Yeah, it’s a pretty short chapter and nothing much of interest happened, except the introduction of Manabe Masamune and Kazuichi. OCs that were meant to be references, but ended up becoming more and more developed the more I talked to ChibiFoxAI. It happens and I’m not really complaining.
So to recap, Naruto has started his work on yet another child, Sasuke has everything to worry about that, and Chōko is prone to breakdowns when pushed to her limits. And Kakashi is a sadist.

And before I forget, in regards to the Genin team Iruka was on, that was a blatant shout-out (and reference) to H.E. Gray’s Things Team Nineteen Are No Longer Allowed To Do, which is a HILARIOUS read. You’ll have to find the list on livejournal, though. In any case, I do not own that idea and I just wanted to make it known.

Well, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, so until next time, everyone!
"Miku, stop that, dattebayo!"

CRASH!

I winced as I watched Naruto failed to stop the ultramarine-haired four-year-old from knocking over what appeared to be an expensive vase. We are so getting our pay docked— "Kiku, get down from there!"

"Fak you!" Miku’s double yelled at me from the ceiling, where she was currently standing on.

"Hey, don’t make me come up there—aauugh!" She spit on me! "Oh that is it, you little brat—you are gonna get it!"

Meanwhile with Sasuke, he was having a rather peaceful time with the white-haired boy at his side. Riku was his name and, unlike his sisters, Riku was quiet and well behaved. As for Kakashi, he just sat by, enjoying the chaos Miku and Kiku were causing Naruto and I. To him, this was yet another D-rank mission full of pain and suffering for his Genin.

It was just our luck that the Sandaime found another babysitting job for us, watching over Takemi Tae's triplets—and yes, triplets. We were just that lucky…

Takemi Tae was a Tokubetsu Jounin who worked as a nurse (the non-medic-nin type) at a civilian school. She was also an acquaintance of Kakashi’s (I'm guessing ANBU, based on how ambiguous Kakashi was when he mentioned this) and used to be quite the active kunoichi before getting pregnant with triplets. How she managed to care for triplets when she was a single mother with a job, I have no idea—oh, right…shadow clones. It's the reason why Tae even had to put in a request for babysitting, since her constant use of shadow clones nearly exhausted her chakra reserves and she was on medical orders to refrain from using the technique until she fully recovered.

I'm just gonna focus on getting this brat off the ceiling now…

"You're doing great, you two." Oh shut up, Kakashi! "Try not to get the ceiling dirty, Chōko—and watch out for glass, Naruto!"

"Stop sitting and do something, Scarecrow, dattebayo!" Naruto was pissed.

"Your mother's going to get mad when she hears you've been misbehaving, Takemi Kiku!" I yelled as I ran after Kiku on the ceiling. It was rather disorienting running upside-down like this, and rather inconvenient, because gravity kept wanting to take my glasses down, but fuck it, I need to get that four-year-old off the ceiling before she hurts herself from overusing her chakra.

"Only three more hours to go, everyone," Kakashi said as he continued reading *Icha Icha Paradise.*

Joy...

…

About two and a half hours later, Miku and Kiku passed out on the sofa, having exhausted
themselves from tormenting Naruto and me. Riku was still awake and seemed rather relieved that his sisters were asleep. The house was certainly quieter, that's for sure…

"Why us…?" I found myself asking as I slumped back in a chair. "Why?"

Naruto said something, but his voice came out muffled because his face was flat on the table we were sitting at. Because the first thing he did after sitting down was slam his forehead onto the table and stuck to that position for the past five minutes. Naruto was just done.

And Sasuke was currently cleaning up the mess Miku and Kiku had made—as a favor to Naruto and I, since Riku wasn't a little shit. In fact, Riku seemed quite eager to help Sasuke out in any way. He was almost like a little puppy, the way Riku was at Sasuke's side… How cute.

"Did I do good?" Riku asked Sasuke after the two had finished cleaning.

Sasuke looked down at Riku for a moment before ruffling the boy's hair. "Yes, you did."

A light blush tinged Riku's cheeks as he smiled widely at Sasuke and—holy crap, shark teeth.

"Ah, so that's who the father is," Kakashi suddenly said. "Sensei say what?" Okay, I'm lost.

"Oh, you'll find out when Takemi shows up," Kakashi said as he closed his book. "Speaking of which, here she is."

As if on cue, a young woman with short, ultramarine-colored hair entered the house. She wore a white lab coat over her blue dress and had on a pair of high heels that made her seem taller than she already was. Her first question to us upon opening the door was, "Who did what this time?"

Ladies and gentlemen, meet Takemi Tae and holy crap, what does she mean by this time?

…

About fifteen minutes later, Kakashi enlightened us to a bit of information that he was keeping from Sasuke, Naruto, and I…information that Tae had told him before barging out of the house seven hours ago…information that could have given us a heads-up in regards to the hell-spawn that were Tae's children. It turns out that we were the eleventh Genin team in charge of watching over Tae's triplets. What happened to the previous teams? They kept calling it quits after the first day of watching over Miku, Kiku, and Riku—by the way, Riku wasn't always the quiet, well-behaved child he was today. Nooo, he was the worst out of his siblings.

Riku has a biting problem with people he doesn't like. Team 7 as a whole was only fortunate that Riku actually liked us, because those shark teeth are not just for show. Nope…those teeth of his were known to have sent five Genin and two Jounin to the hospital.

By the by, Riku wasn't the only one with shark teeth…Kiku also had them. It was literally the only thing setting her and Miku apart, as the two were nearly identical in appearance. Well, that and the fact that Miku liked to wear dresses. Kiku preferred to wear shorts—all for the sake of running around on the ceiling.

"Hey, hey, why don't you have a husband-ttebayo?" Naruto suddenly asked Tae.

"Oh my god, Naruto, you can't just ask people why they don't have a husband!" I'm getting Mean Girls vibe from my tone and response. Great, now I'm gonna be tempted to make quotes for the rest
of the day…and only I will ever get them. This really sucks…

"Nah, it's fine!" At least Tae doesn't seem to be offended by Naruto's question. In fact, she seems rather amused. "To answer your question, I just never got romance—like, it just wasn't my thing. I'm happy being single."

"And yet you have these three," Sasuke remarked as his eyes focused on Miku, Kiku, and Riku.

"Just because I like being single doesn't mean I don't want a family." Tae sounded as if she had already told this to others already—many times, by the looks of how automatic her response appeared. She almost sounded jaded… "The orphanage considered me an unfitting parent, so I had to take an alternative in making my own family."

If I recalled correctly, the orphanage doesn't allow single-parent adoptions, if the parent in mind is a shinobi. Something about the possibility of a single-parent shinobi getting themselves killed while on duty and orphaning their child yet again… It is pretty much the reason why shinobi and civilian relationships are encouraged, if said shinobi is not from a major clan.

In most cases, it's usually an incentive for shinobi to pass on their genes to the next generation of future shinobi instead of adopting. If it ended up producing a four-year-old girl like Kiku, who can walk on the ceiling without any problem, then it certainly has some logic behind it (not very good logic, but logic nonetheless). I'm guessing the previous wars must have something to do with that.

"So you went to Iwai?" Kakashi questioned.

"Yup!" Tae grinned widely. "I wasn't expecting triplets, though…any other questions you'd like to ask since we're taking the time to catch up, Hatake?"

Kakashi thought for a moment. "Well…I've been meaning to ask, but I thought Kiku was your only daughter…Did I miss something?"

…

"Geez, has it been that long since we last talked to each other?" Tae rubbed the back of her head. "Well, time to give you an update…as you can see, Riku's my only boy, Hatake."

"I can see that…I guess I must have made a mistake." Kakashi chuckled. "Sorry about that, Mikuchan."

Miku stared at Kakashi for a moment before smiling. "It's okay! Everyone makes mistakes!"

Indeed.

…

It was only until Kakashi, Sasuke, Naruto, and I returned to the Academy that the meaning behind Miku's words finally hit me, at which I ended up blurting out, "So that's what she meant!"

I soon found myself getting stared at by everyone in the room, including the Sandaime and Iruka. I need to learn to stop embarrassing myself…

"I see you all made it back unscathed…" the Sandaime mused as he reviewed the mission scroll Kakashi had returned to him. "How was Riku doing?"

"Not biting, that's for sure," Sasuke remarked.
"I think he likes you best-ttebayo," Naruto huffed. "Must be nice not having to deal with Miku-chan."

"At least you didn't have to get Kiku off the ceiling!" My glasses kept falling off—not fun!

"Would you like to take on another mission?" the Sandaime asked Kakashi, who seemed to be considering it for a moment before shaking his head.

"I think I let my Genin suffer enough today." Suffering that you were certainly enjoying, ya sadist! "We'll be back tomorrow."

And so ends yet another day full of suffering…worst seven hours ever. The money was not worth it! It totally isn’t—okay, maybe it is, but I still have lingering memories of struggling to save up money from my past life (college is fucking expensive), so any money is good enough for now.

"I'm gonna go buy a birthday card…” Shino's birthday is coming up soon and I'm pretty sure Gaara should be receiving our gifts for him in Suna very soon. "You guys coming along?"

Naruto nodded his head. "Might as well—do you think he'll be home when we drop it off-ttebayo?"

"Doubt it." Sasuke sighed. "Considering how busy we've been, they're probably just as busy."

"Hey, Kakashi-sensei, what do you know of Team 8 and Team 10?" I looked questioningly at Kakashi, who seemed about ready to ditch us to go spend some quality time staring at the memorial rock (most likely). "They probably have it better…"

Kakashi tilted his head to the side. "Last I heard, Team 10 was on messenger duty and Team 8 is doing god knows what chasing after Tora the cat."

Sasuke made a face. "Who the hell is Tora?"

"A feline from hell," Kakashi replied.

Naruto laughed. "You're probably exaggerating-ttebayo."

"I dunno…” I seriously am not looking forward to ever getting stuck with a D-rank mission involving Tora.

"You might have had it bad today, but at least you're not stuck on a team with an Inuzuka chasing after a cat." Kakashi certainly made a point. "So about your outburst, Chōko…just what exactly did you mean?"

"About Takemi-san taking an alternative—it was Munehisa-san, wasn't it?" That is totally not what I meant, but Kakashi doesn't need to know! "He's the father!"

"Is that what Manabe-san meant when he said Kazuichi wasn't the only brat he was a grandfather to?" Naruto seemed to have made a connection.

"I think he was talking about Iwai's daughter, Michiko, but you could be right." Kakashi shrugged.

…

"Kakashi-sensei, how do you know all of this?" Sasuke asked a question that I felt like asking as well.

Kakashi chuckled. "Iwai runs a weapons shop, remember? Where do you think I get my kunai and
"Shuriken?"

"Riiight…” Almost forgot about that… "So Sasuke, Naruto, and I are gonna go get something for Shino's birthday, do you want anything while we're out shopping? I know you're gonna leave us."

"Get a carton of milk, we're almost out." Kakashi promptly left after that.

Why does it feel so normal to hear Kakashi say that? "I think we've domesticated him…"

…

…

Considering how well we did, in comparison to other Genin teams, it wasn't that much of a surprise that we got put back on babysitting the Takemi triplets the next day. That still didn't mean I didn't complain, because I was complaining on the way to the Takemi household.

"Why the hell are we even babysitting these kids?!" I don't want this, dammit!

"Because it brings money to the house, Chōko," Kakashi said before ruffling my hair. "I'm sure they won't be that bad today."

"Says you!" Naruto exclaimed. "You're not the one putting up with them, dattebayo!"

"I don't hear Sasuke complaining…” Kakashi turned to Sasuke, who was silent.

"That's because Riku isn't being the terror he was with everyone else!” Hell, we're pretty damn lucky Riku hasn't bitten any of us.

"It's because he likes us," Sasuke remarked.

"I think it's more than that in your case-ttebayo…” Naruto muttered.

"Ah, young love!" Kakashi, I would appreciate it if you do not read *Icha Icha Paradise* when you say stuff like that.

At least I get another chance to look at Tae's legs…what? They're very lovely legs…

"Yeah, I think so too." Oh god, did I seriously say that out loud enough for Kakashi to hear me? "It's okay, Chōko—I won't judge."

*Oh god why…*

…

…

One of the upsides to babysitting the Takemi triplets was that Kakashi let us go after our job was done. However, because of how well we were doing—which is a hell of a lot better than the previous ten teams—we were stuck babysitting the triplets until Tae's restriction on using shadow clones wore off, which should be within two weeks.

"Just sit back and stay comfy, why don't ya, Kakashi-sensei?” I glared at Kakashi as I dragged Kiku off the ceiling. This was our third day watching these hell-spawns…and I was starting to grow exhausted.
"I'll step in when you need me the most," Kakashi said as he turned the page to the book he most likely read so many times.

"WE NEED YOU, DATTEBAYO!" Naruto yelled as Miku proceeded to throw a shuriken at him. Luckily, for Naruto, Sasuke caught it before it hit him.

"Heehee, it's just a toy, stupid!" Miku stuck out her tongue.

"Falling for such a simple genjutsu…I thought you three learned better?" Kakashi remarked.

"Genjutsu…?" I blinked a few times, my eyes widening afterwards. "Kai!"

Well I'll be damned…it is just a toy—a doll, to be exact. Holy crap, Tae's triplets are waaay too advance for their age…

"That's what happens when you pair up someone like Takemi and Iwai," Kakashi explained. "This is why Takemi doesn't let her kids out of the house, unless otherwise."

I have a feeling there is more behind Tae's reasons, one of them being Danzō… Hell, this is probably the reason why her kids are so destructive. I'd be bored enough to take it out on the new guys if I had to stay inside the house all the time… Well, for the most part. The only reason the triplets are stuck at home is because they are currently grounded.

The Takemi household is pretty huge. It's located on the outskirts of town, near a forest. It's pretty isolated and has a rather large backyard. It's a nice house, overall. It would be even nicer if these hell-spawns would just behave!

This is gonna be a looong two weeks…

... Near the end of our first week babysitting the Takemi triplets, Kakashi finally stepped in to help us… and it was to keep Riku from sinking his teeth into Naruto. Just what was it that set Riku off? Well, it all starts with Miku and Kiku and it ends with Naruto and Sasuke losing their first kiss to each other because of them. By the way, the "kiss" between Naruto and Sasuke still managed to happened…and wanna know what's ironic about it?

I was the one who almost lost my first kiss, but then Sasuke got in the way and yeah… Even though it was an accident, Riku was rather pissed off. His red eyes were practically gleaming as he glared at Naruto, killing intent radiating off of his body rather potently for someone of his age.

I guess that's why Kakashi decided to step in because holy crap, Riku could have seriously harmed Naruto. For the rest of the day, after that, Kakashi made it a point to keep Riku at his side, making sure the white-haired boy wasn't out of his sight. Meanwhile with Sasuke and Naruto, the two were currently mourning the loss of their first kiss like a stereotypical shoujo protagonist.

And Kiku and Miku were noticeably quiet after Kakashi got involved with their brother. It probably had something to do with Riku's killing intent, considering the two girls stopped laughing immediately after their brother started exuding it. Hell, it turned out that Miku wet herself because of it. She tried to keep quiet about it, but the puddle she left behind was something that could not be ignored, as was the new dress she was wearing.

"I'm sorry…" Miku sniffed. "I didn't mean too…"
Miku was trying her hardest not to cry, but when Naruto just ruffled her hair before going off to get the mop, she started bawling. She hadn't expected Naruto to be so nice to her, especially after all the torment she had caused him. She spent the next few minutes apologizing to Naruto as he mopped up the mess she had made.

Seeing her sister in such a state must have made Kiku feel rather guilty as I soon found her shuffling closer and closer to my side. I thought nothing of it first until I felt a small hand tug on my haori and a rather shaky voice say, "I-I-I'm s-sorry, N-Nee-san."

Needless to say, for something that could have landed Naruto in the hospital, had Kakashi not intervened, it ended up doing more good than bad. Miku and Kiku were no longer treating Naruto and I like crap. Riku was still pissed off, but Kakashi was there to keep him from misbehaving and Sasuke was at least doing a good job of explaining why it wasn't nice to hurt Naruto.

It took a couple of days, but Riku eventually stopped glaring at Naruto. It probably had to do with the fact that Kakashi made it a habit to drag Riku away from Sasuke every time the four-year-old glared at Naruto. Riku did not like being away from Sasuke. That was a fact and Sasuke knew it, but didn't actually say anything, because he didn't actually mind.

"I only mind if he tries to hurt Naruto or take me away from you guys," was Sasuke's response when I asked him about it.

"So…would you say he is better than most of your fangirls-ttebayo?" Naruto asked after hearing Sasuke's response.

I wasn't that surprised to hear Sasuke say, "Yes."

Because if there was one thing that I could say that Sasuke's fan girls can learn from Riku, it's that Riku knows how to respect boundaries and keep his hands to himself.

…

Come the second week, due to their good behavior, the triplets were ungrounded and were allowed to leave the house. Miku and Kiku were quite ecstatic to leave the house, as was Riku, who couldn't keep himself from smiling. It certainly made it easier to watch the triplets, now that the three of them weren't bored out of their wits being cooped up inside.

The rest of the week was spent with Miku and Naruto making flower crowns using the many flowers that grew in a large patch of grass in the backyard. Kakashi more often than not had to drag my sorry ass down from the large trees Kiku and I were climbing because I got stuck. And by stuck, I mean out of my comfort zone and unwilling to climb down, for fear of falling and getting hurt.

Sometimes I hate having a fear of falling, because I don't mind heights… I just can't stand the thought of a fall from said height. It's the one reason I'm so terrified of roller coasters…well, that and my restriction-based claustrophobia, which I found out I had shortly before my past life came to an end. The things I learn while I'm bored…

And Sasuke was teaching Riku how to handle real shuriken and kunai, because Shisui's influence seemed to have finally revealed itself in some way in the Uchiha. As if Itachi's forehead pokes weren't enough…not saying there is anything bad about it, it just feels a little bittersweet to see it.

As for Tae, she was quite relieved that her kids were no longer sending people to the hospital. She was also impressed with how mellowed out they turned out. She was almost sad to see us go on our last day…almost. Tae was actually happy to return to her previous lifestyle of using shadow clones
to watch over her children. Something about just being around her children keeping her mind at peace.

Again, I feel as though Danzō is involved in some way, with Tae trying to keep her kids hidden under his radar.

"Try not to exhaust yourself this time around," Kakashi told Tae as we were leaving the Takemi household.

"No promises!" Tae was honestly amazing for a single mother with triplets.

Miku and Kiku were waving goodbye to us, while Riku seemed to be trying his best not to cry. It was only until the Takemi household was nearly out of sight that Riku suddenly yelled, "I like you!"

I'll give you three guesses to whom Riku aimed his confession to and it sure as hell isn't me.

"Ino-chan's not gonna like this, dattebayo!" Naruto laughed.

"Hn..." Sasuke tried to avoid making eye contact with any of us. He let out an annoyed whine when Kakashi ruffled his hair.

"Crushes are can be quite cute, no?" Kakashi seemed rather amused.

It really depends, but in the case of Riku, it is quite cute. Seeing as Sasuke is starting to get annoyed with us, I guess it's time to change the subject. "So what do you guys wanna do after we get our pay?"

We ended up going to Ichiraku Ramen after we received our pay. Kakashi stuck around with us for a bowl of ramen before going on his way to do his usual thing. Naruto, Sasuke, and I stayed behind. We were mostly just taking the moment to let the fact that we were done watching Tae's triplets sink in... It honestly feels good to get a break from those triplets.

While they can be sweet when they want to, it's still very exhausting to watch over Miku, Kiku, and Riku seven hours a day. I really hope Sarutobi doesn't give us another babysitting mission, because I'm gonna break a door if that happens tomorrow.

"Iruka-sensei's not gonna like that-ttebayo," Naruto said before slurping up another bowl of noodles.

"I don't care—I'm tired of watching people's kids..." At this rate, I'll actually welcome the day we have to retrieve Tora the cat.

"I just want to know when we're gonna start training." Sasuke sighed.

"So long as it doesn't involve trees, I'm good with anything..." Knowing Kakashi, he's probably gonna try and get me out of my comfort zone little by little, so I better learn to suck it up. At least I know I can depend on him to get me down...

...

...

The next day brought us back to the Mission Assignment Desk, so no training today. Instead, why don't you try to guess what D-rank mission Hiruzen decided to give us?

Another. Fucking. Babysitting. Mission... "Motherfucker!"
"Chōko, no!" Too late, Iruka!

Were it not for Kakashi, the door would have never lived to see another day. As for our mission… well, it seems that Team 7 was finally going to see Munehisa Iwai. It turns out the shop owner was in need of some assistance watching over his two-year-old daughter, Michiko. And since Team 7 has been doing sooo well in the babysitting department, the Sandaime decided we would be the perfect team for the job. It probably also helps that we have the most experience working with children of Kirigakure descent, assuming Michiko and her father have shark teeth.

Considering Kiku and Riku, it's highly likely Michiko and Iwai have shark teeth. Let's just hope Michiko doesn't have a biting problem, like her half-brother, Riku…

Of course, the one thing neither of us was expecting when we arrived at the Munehisa weapons shop was the presence of another team that Naruto, Sasuke and I found so familiar. I certainly had the biggest shock of my life when I saw that Lee finally made his transition into looking like a miniature version of his sensei, Maito Gai. Like, holy crap—how are they not related?!

"Chōko-san!" Lee happily exclaimed. "Love!"

You know, I still can't get over the fact Lee has a crush on me—or rather, I still can't get over the fact that someone actually has a crush on me. Also…"Hello, Neji-san!"

Neji nearly dropped the box he was carrying upon seeing me wave at him. "Wh-What are you doing here?"

"We could be asking you the same thing, dattebayo!" Naruto remarked.

"Just what is going on?" I would seriously like to know that, too, Sasuke.

Then Gai decided to make his appearance and upon seeing Kakashi, the iconic bright smile of his crossed his face. "Well, if it isn't my eternal rival, Kakashi!"

Welp, looks like Kakashi is in a similar position as me, minus the crush-thing. At least one good thing is gonna come out of this babysitting mission…and that's that Sasuke, Naruto, and I won't be the only ones suffering, because now Kakashi has to deal with Gai. Isn't karma lovely sometimes?

Chapter End Notes

3-31-18 STILL EDITING AND FYI, FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE STILL CONFUSED ABOUT IT: Miku is trans and THAT'S what Chōko's outburst is about, because she JUST figured it out after not thinking much about it. And that's about it!

2-28-15 SO SOMEONE MADE ME A THING. CHECK IT OUT RIGHT HERE!

Yeah, I happen to have a thing for world-building, which is what this chapter serves as a purpose…aside from setting up an eventual meet up with Team Gai, because that is definitely a thing. Yes.
I hope you guys enjoyed the Takemi triplets and Tae, because I grew rather invested in them. By the by, Tae is aromantic, in case anyone didn’t catch on (she is also autistic, which is just something I wanted to share). And she is indeed an acquaintance of Kakashi’s through ANBU…and that’s about it to that relationship. If anything, Tae is muuuch closer to Munehisa Iwai…platonically. More will be revealed in the next chapter.

Also, a big thank you to those who have been taking the time to comment! Sorry if I haven’t been responding, I just been so busy and just…ugh, college. Anyways, I hope you guys enjoy this chapter, so until next time everyone!
Munehisa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Much like Masamune's metal works shop, the Munehisa weapons shop was stationed at the house the owner and his daughter inhabited. It was a simple two-story house that was located in marketplace district that shinobi usually traverse for weapons, armor, and all that good stuff. Masamune makes a living out of distributing his products to the shops in this district, of which includes the Munehisa weapons shop.

Munehisa Iwai, the current owner of the shop, was a Jounin with a rather standoffish-looking appearance to him. Stubble grew on his jawline and chin, and his right arm was in a sling. He was a head taller than Kakashi in height and wore mostly black clothes. He also had on a black newsboy cap and had an unlit cigarette in his mouth. What took away from Iwai's standoffish appearance was the tiny two-year-old girl who clung to his leg and the fact that the cigarette in his mouth was actually a lollipop.

When he heard that Team 7 had taken on the job of babysitting his daughter, Iwai was quick to say that the only request he had placed was for assistance in running the shop, of which Team Gai was specifically requested. Why, I have no idea, but I have a feeling that it involves Tenten. Anyways, Kakashi then explained that the request wasn't made by Iwai, but by Masamune.

"Why the hell did the old man do that?" Iwai scowled. "I can take care of Michiko just fine without any assistance."

"It says here that you collapsed the other day from overexerting yourself…" Kakashi said as he held up the mission scroll. "You should really stop pushing yourself, Iwai—especially with that arm in a sling."

"How did the old man even find out about that?" Iwai thought for a moment before turning to Tenten. "Tenten—what the hell?!"

"I'm not keeping secrets when it affects your health, Iwai!" Tenten snapped. "Especially not after you hid the fact that you had a fever yesterday and passed out because, instead of taking the time to recover, you put Michiko and the shop ahead of your health! You were only lucky that my team and I were here to assist you because you sprained your arm."

Holy shit, what is with these single-parent shinobi putting their children before their health?! More importantly, how come Tenten is talking to Iwai as if she knows him? Like, what's with the familiarity?

"Munehisa-san is Tenten's brother-in-law," Lee whispered to me. "Her older sister married into the Manabe family."

Going off from what I know, Iwai took on his wife's surname, so that means Tenten's older sister married Kazuichi's father. This pretty much contradicts with my assumption of Tenten being an orphan in canon, since Tenten here actually has a family. Technically, she is still an orphan, but she was anything but on her own, as I had assumed she was in canon. Just looking at her family here, Tenten's interests in bukijutsu suddenly make a whole lot of sense.

Bukijutsu are techniques that entail the use of any handheld weapons in combat. In canon, this was...
what Tenten was known for, aside from fūinjutsu, which are basically sealing techniques. That is about as much as I know of Tenten that doesn't involve her being the tsukkomi (AKA, the straight man, in comedic terms), which was certainly a prominent thing in the Naruto spin-off, where Rock Lee is the main character… God, I know waaay too much about the spin-off than I should in comparison to the main series.

Of course, that aside, I'm surprised with how vocal Tenten is here. One of the things I usually hear about Tenten is her lack of screen time. And yet, look at Tenten now…canon versus reality, in my case, is quite jarring.

"Ever since Ina died, you've been pushing yourself to run the shop and watch over Michiko without taking your health into consideration!" Tenten was honestly irritated with Iwai. "The only reason it hasn't been that much of a problem was because Ieyasu was here."

"Jii-chan gone…" Michiko suddenly spoke. "He never woke up."

Well, that was the most sobering comment I have ever heard a two-year-old say.

"That's right—he's gone now." Tenten frowned. "Now it's just you and Michiko. You might try to hide it, but I can tell you're not taking this well."

Iwai certainly seemed at a loss for words. Meanwhile with the rest of Team Gai, I'm honestly amazed that Gai has kept quiet. Of course, there was a time and a place to praise the beauty of youth and considering what Tenten said about yesterday's events, it was a serious subject that Tenten was tackling. It certainly explained Masamune's reasons to put in a request for assistance in childcare.

"Anyways, leave Michiko and the shop to us," Tenten continued. "We'll handle it—now go to your room! I can tell you're still sick!"

At this moment, Michiko turned to her father and scolded him lightly, "Told you!"

Iwai sputtered a bit, but didn't protest. He probably knew that it was pointless to do so after everything Tenten had said. He tugged down on his cap and then ruffled his daughter's green hair before making his way to the stairs, which led to the second floor of the house where his room was, presumably.

The first floor of the Munehisa household was split off into two sections. The section that wasn't used for the shop, which was located at the front of the house, consisted of the actual house itself. The room we were currently occupying was the living room. The living room was directly connected to the shop, the entrance of which was blocked off by a curtain. The stairs Iwai was using was located to the far right of the living room. After Iwai was out of our sight, Tenten looked at all of us with a wide smile on her face.

"Now that that's out of the way, let's get back to business, shall we?" Tenten looked at us as if she hadn't just told her brother-in-law to go to his room after calling him out for neglecting his health. Tenten can be scary when she wants to be…

"Such touching concern!" Gai finally spoke, scaring the entire crap out of all of us with his volume and energy. "Truly Tenten is an inspiration to us all!"

"Indeed she is, Gai-sensei!" Lee agreed.

Tenten looked about done now that she heard her teammate and Jounin-sensei talk. If this is what she
puts up on a daily basis when it comes to being on Team Gai, I honestly feel bad for Tenten. I'm not sure about Neji, though. He just seems so used to it that he doesn't even show much reaction.

"So…" I focused my attention back on the little girl who stood before us.

Michiko was a two-year-old girl with short, green hair and big, black eyes. She wore a white dress and had a lilac-colored ribbon on the left side of her hair. So far, she appeared innocent, but I wasn't taking my chances after what happened with the Takemi triplets and Kazuichi. And considering the current trend with most children of Kirigakure descent, Michiko most likely possessed the same shark-like teeth Kazuichi, Riku, and Kiku had. Not too sure about that, though.

"I'm Munehisa Michiko!" Okay, I thought I was hearing things, but it seems Michiko has a lisp when she talks. Also, the moment of truth came and…Michiko has the shark teeth. That probably explains the lisp…

"I'm Uzumaki Naruto!" Naruto was quick to introduce himself to Michiko. Sasuke soon followed after, and I did the same, with Kakashi staying quiet until Gai bugged him.

"So is there anything we need to know before you leave Michiko in our hands?" I looked questioningly at Tenten, hoping for a sign that Michiko was nothing like her half-siblings.

"Does she bite?" Sasuke was quite blunt when he asked.

Tenten stared at Sasuke for a moment. "Bite…? I hope not. She knows better…right, Michiko?"

Michiko just smiled at Tenten. "Right!"

Somehow, I still don't trust Michiko…

Two hours passed and surprisingly, Michiko was a complete sweetie. She behaved well and got along quite nicely with Naruto, which was definitely a first with him. Kakashi was currently busy dealing with Gai, who was quite happy to catch up with his eternal rival. I was enjoying every moment of Kakashi's suffering and Sasuke was just taking the moment to enjoy the fact that this was probably the first mission where we had little to no trouble.

Then Lee dropped by to hit on me and things got really awkward after that. This was, by far, the longest I've been around Lee and just…he's being really sweet about it, but I haven't a crap of an idea how to handle stuff like this.

"Can we just start out as friends?!" I suddenly blurted out.

Lee blinked a few times and grinned widely. "Certainly! Strong bonds are needed in ensuring a future relationship!"

Oh god, what have I done?!

"Ah, what youthfulness!" Gai, shut up, I don't need you making a huge deal out of things— "To be stricken with the spirit of love is such a wonderful thing!"

I sputtered, incapable of producing a coherent response to the crap Gai was spewing. I was pretty sure I was blushing—oh shut up, Kakashi! Damn bastard was laughing at me…what goes around, comes around, I guess…
Luckily, for me, Neji came around to drag Lee back into the shop, saying that Lee's break time was over. I took a moment after that to hide my face behind my scarf for a good minute or two until I was sure that my face had cooled down. It was around that time that Michiko tugged on my haori and said, "Hungry!"

I have a feeling Naruto sent Michiko over to me… "What do you want for lunch?"

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I ended up making a huge batch of onigiri with various fillings. Michiko just took one look at the platter and sniffed around before grabbing an onigiri and taking a huge bite out of it. A light blush tinged her cheeks as she chewed. When she swallowed, she laughed and loudly exclaimed, "Salmon!"

Holy hell, did Michiko just sniff out all that onigiri so that she'd specifically get salmon? Well, at least she eats the entire thing, unlike Kazuichi. I better bring lunch to everyone else and— "Stop eating all of the salmon ones, Michiko!"

"MINE!" Yeah, no, I'm not risking anything against Michiko. She could have all the salmon onigiri she wants, just keep those teeth away from me.

...  

While we were all eating during our lunch break, in which Lee kept complimenting my cooking skills, I took the time to learn more about our client, Iwai. I was bored and after hearing so much about Iwai, I wanted to learn more about him and the shop he ran.

According to Tenten, Iwai had actually inherited the shop through his wife, Ina, who had inherited the shop through her adoptive father, Ieyasu. Before Michiko had been born, Iwai had planned to put his shinobi career aside to care for Michiko, while his wife ran the shop. Then Ina died giving birth, calling for an immediate change of plans, where Iwai now had to struggle between running the shop and caring for his daughter. Up until recently, Ieyasu had provided Iwai assistance in watching over Michiko. Though, as Tenten had stated earlier, Ieyasu passed away, leaving Iwai on his own.

Ieyasu had been the only civilian in his family of shinobi. Come the Second Shinobi World War, all that was left were a few of his siblings and cousins, who later died in the Third Shinobi World War. Ina was an orphan from the Second Shinobi World War, of whom Ieyasu had adopted out of sympathy and loneliness when he found her wandering around the marketplace district on her own. It was because of Ieyasu's losses that motivated Ina to stay a civilian and come the Third Shinobi World War, it was what kept Ina alive and with Ieyasu.

It was also because of Ieyasu's losses that Ina gave Iwai a condition that he was to follow if he wanted to marry her. And just what was that? It was to put his shinobi career aside, because Ina was paranoid of losing Iwai after a close call in the Third Shinobi World War. It's honestly tragic that Iwai, the only shinobi in the remaining Munehisa family, ended up losing Ina and Ieyasu, both of whom were civilians.

As for Michiko's fate, whether or not she was to end up at the Academy or a civilian school, it was still up to question, but Tenten mentioned that there was a high chance Michiko took after Iwai, in that respect.

"Let's just hope she doesn't start walking around on the ceiling…” I found myself saying as I
watched Michiko continue to stuff herself with salmon-filled onigiri.

"What do you mean by that?" Tenten asked.

"Where do I even begin?" Holy crap, there was a lot to say about the Takemi triplets before they came around.

"What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of triplets?" Sasuke decided to help me out a bit.

Tenten blinked a few times. "Triplets…? Oh, are you talking about Takemi-san's children? Wait—who got bit by Riku?"

"Uh…" About that…

Naruto grinned widely. "No one did-ttebayo! Riku likes us—well, he likes Sasuke more, if you know what I mean, dattebayo!"

Sasuke scowled and stuffed an onigiri in Naruto's mouth. "Shut up!"

"The spirit of love is certainly lively this year!" Oooh, Gai caught on…yeesh, I feel bad for Sasuke, now.

"He's only four!" Sasuke snapped. "He'll get over it when he's older!"

"Didn't Itachi-san say something similarly when it came to your fan girls?" Neji looked questioningly at Sasuke.

If Lee hadn't gotten in the way, Sasuke would have punched Neji right in the face.

"Now, now—not in front of Michiko!" Kakashi said as Lee struggled to keep Sasuke away from Neji.

"Indeed!" Lee exclaimed. "As her caretakers, you three must set a good example for Munehisa-san's daughter!"

"But I wanna see 'em fight!" Michiko suddenly whined. "It's boring here!"

Michiko's little outburst caused everyone to go silent as all attention was on her. She looked at us with her innocent eyes, her cheeks puffed up in annoyance.

"Lee and Neji always fight…" Oh my god, what the hell has been happening before Team 7 got the babysitting request?

"Neji?" I turned my attention to the Hyuuga, ignoring the fact that I just omitted an honorific.

"Y-Yes?" Neji seemed a bit nervous when he looked at me.

"I thought you knew better." There is a time and a place for sparring—on the job is not one of them, unless that is what the job requires!

"I…apologize…" Neji averted my gaze as a luminescent blush covered his face.

I blinked a few times, somewhat surprised with Neji's response. I was expecting him to defend himself, but nope. He just apologized and, well, I seriously wasn't expecting that. Well…shit. I don't know what to say…
"Th-That's okay…" was what I ended up saying to Neji. It was pretty awkward…

"So…no fighting?" And Michiko is still at it.

Sometime after lunch, I found myself sitting on the floor in front of the sofa. Michiko was right behind me, sitting on the sofa as she combed my hair. Neji, Lee, and Tenten had already returned to their positions in the shop, with Gai staying behind, as usual, to talk with Kakashi. Naruto and Sasuke were currently lounging about on the floor, very much bored out of their wits, as the only thing Michiko wanted to do was comb my hair…because it was long.

I was a little annoyed that I had to unbraid my hair, but if it kept Michiko occupied and not trying to get any of us to fight each other, then I'm good…because Michiko is that type of girl. She almost managed to instigate a fight between Kakashi and Gai, but Tenten managed to put an end to that before it even began.

As Michiko continued to comb my hair, I took a moment to look at the green ribbon in my hand. Naruto gave it to me on my fifth birthday. Nearly eight years have passed, and the ribbon still looks the same as ever. I'd normally question something like this, but I won't…not with this particular item. It's just nice having something stay so consistent after all these years, after all the change that has occurred.

"Hey…Naruto?" I turned my attention to the blond.

"Hmm…?" Naruto responded back in a sluggish tone.

"Thanks again for the ribbon." I really do like this ribbon…

"Oh, no problem-ttebayo!" Naruto grinned widely at me.

"You're still terrible at tying ribbons…" Sasuke, don't start.

"Hey, do you remember how I got mad at you for saying that Chōko-chan's ribbon was ugly?" Oh man, nostalgia wham.

"Yeah…" Sasuke was smiling. "I'm glad Chōko invited you…hey, Chōko?"

"Hmm?" I turned to Sasuke.

"Thank you," Sasuke said.

Two simple words…and it left me feeling rather warm inside. I felt my face heat up a bit as I said, "Y-You're welcome!"

Team 7, so far, had spent a total of eight and a half hours at the Munehisa household watching over Michiko. It was certainly longer than we had ever watched over a child, but Michiko wasn't as bad as her half-siblings or cousin, Kazuichi. Speaking of Kazuichi, I have a feeling Masamune is going
to put in a babysitting request for Team 7 sometime this month.

For now, we were just killing time, playing hide-and-seek with Michiko. We had another half hour to go before our job was done and, for a two-year-old, Michiko was surprisingly good at hiding from three Genin. Sasuke, Naruto, and I had looked everywhere, but we just couldn't find her. As much as we didn't want to, we had to give up. She was just too good…

I was in the living room, looking everywhere for the green-haired little girl, while Sasuke was upstairs, and Naruto was in the backyard.

"Heeeyyyy!" I called out. "We give up! You can come out now! You won!"

"Heehee!" Okay, that was definitely Michiko. "I'm right here, silly!"

Right…here—oh fuck no. I slowly looked up, my eyes widening when I saw that Michiko was standing on the ceiling above me. For the love of—when the hell did she get up there?! Forget that, how long has she been up there?! A two year old should not be able to do that! That is seriously dangerous for her health!

"Michiko, don't you dare move!" Oh god, I need to get her down before she falls! Time to defy gravity and hope no one gets hurt! "Just stay there!"

…

_Rollin' around at the speed of sound,

_Got places to go, gotta catch Michiko!

You know…there's a reason why children shouldn't be allowed on the ceiling. The fact that I'm currently falling toward the floor with Michiko in my arms is just proof that. Michiko's chakra reserves were not at the capacity to support her gravity-defying antics. It's one of the main reasons why I had every reason to be concerned for Kiku, who liked to push her limits.

In any case, at least Michiko won't get hurt from the fall and I'm quite confident in my landing abilities. We weren't that high up to begin with, so I can definitely handle this! Of course, I was not expecting Neji to catch me in his arms, so that definitely threw me off.

"Nice catch!" Gai flashed a dazzling smile at Neji, a thumbs-up accompanying said smile.

Neji made a face at his sensei before turning his attention to Michiko and me. "Are you okay?"

"Well, I'm not hurt…" And my glasses are still in place. "So yeah, I'm fine…you can put me down now."

It's not that I'm ungrateful or anything, I just want to stand now that I'm off the ceiling.

…

You know, when Neji caught me, I was hoping that Kakashi and Gai were the only people, aside from Michiko, to see. That was not the case as Lee decided to check up on his teammate, while Tenten stayed behind to pack up, as it was closing time. After Neji had put me down, Lee walked over to us and pulled Neji aside.

Lee stared at Neji for a good minute before nodding his head and saying, "I have underestimated you!"
Neji made a face. "What are you…?"

"And for that, I apologize!" Lee bowed apologetically to Neji. "But know that I will not give up! For our rivalry is not only limited to our abilities, but also includes our ambitions in—"

Lee stopped talking almost as once as he barely managed to catch a punch that Neji had been aiming at his face. Lee blinked a few times and jumped back, successfully evading a palm-strike from Neji. What followed after was the scene of Lee playing it defensively as he avoided any attack in his direction from Neji, who kept trying to land a hit.

I nearly dropped Michiko when she suddenly yelled, "Kick his ass!"

I was not expecting Michiko to say that. Of course, I wasn't expecting to see Neji, of all people, start a fight like that with Lee. When Naruto and Sasuke returned to the living room a couple minutes later, I had no explanation for them when they came across the scene of Neji and Lee fighting with each other. It was a pretty one-sided fight in the sense that only Neji was attacking, as Lee kept blocking and dodging.

Michiko was quite into it, much to the horror of Tenten, who walked into the living room seconds after saying she was done closing up the shop.

"Not again!" Tenten exclaimed. "Gai-sensei—do something!"

Gai just smiled his usual smile at Tenten and said, "No can do!"

Tenten stared agape at Gai. "Sensei!"

"I apologize, but this is one fight that I cannot interfere!" Gai explained. "It is a fight between rivals."

"Seems pretty one-sided to me," Kakashi remarked, only to yelp a second later when Gai gave him a hearty slap on the back.

"While I have faith in Lee's abilities, he still has much more to learn before he can surpass a genius like Neji," Gai explained. "The only reason the fight has not yet ended is because Neji wishes for it to continue! Such is the power of youth that flows within him!"

...Yeah, I'm gonna put a stop to this fight. I sighed loudly in exasperation and handed Michiko over to Naruto, who seemed a bit confused at first until I handed my glasses over to Sasuke.

"Don't get hurt-ttebayo!" was all Naruto said before I dashed toward Lee and Neji.

To get in between them was something that I do not ever wish to do again, as Lee's reflexes scared the absolute crap out of me when I tried to push him and Neji apart. I managed to push Neji a few steps back, but Lee grabbed my left arm with both of his hands and was about ready to throw me onto the floor. Then I panicked and ended up aiming a roundhouse kick to Lee's head. Lee was quick to catch my right foot in his left hand, having removed one of his hands off my arm.

While I might have not been thrown onto the floor, which would have been painful, coming from a tajutsu specialist such as *Rock Lee*, it was still rather awkward to be in this position. I mean, I'm kind of stuck, what with Lee still holding my right foot, which is so close to his face. If I wasn't aware of how short I already was before, then I sure as hell was now! Like, holy crap—I am *short*!

Or maybe it's because Lee is tall? Damn thirteen-year-olds and their growth spurts… Still, what the
hell was I thinking, trying to kick Lee in the head?! I mean, it's not as if I can't kick high, because I can. It's just that it's waayy too soon for me to try and land a hit so easily on this guy! Also, I think I might have gone higher than usual when I tried kicking Lee, because oww…

"Please let go of my foot…" Oh god, it's like trying to do the splits in my past life…

…

After Lee released my foot and, while he was at it, my arm, I spent the next few minutes just trying to ignore the pain in my thigh while Lee frantically apologized to me. So much for not getting hurt, I think I'm gonna be feeling this tomorrow! At least Lee and Neji stopped fighting with each other, much to Michiko's annoyance.

"Maybe you should stretch out a bit more," Sasuke suggested as he handed me back my glasses. You had no idea how much I wanted to smack Sasuke in the face for saying that to me. I've done enough stretching in this life to do things I couldn't do in my past life…like the splits. I'm pretty proud that I'm able to do that, by the way.

"Seriously, though…Neji, I thought you knew better." I looked sternly at Neji, who just seemed rather embarrassed.

"Again, I apologize…" Neji averted my gaze after that.

I let out a puff of air and turned to Tenten, who seemed rather relieved. "Are they always like this?"

A small bead of sweat rolled down the side of Tenten's face. "Not always, but… yes."

Wow… "And you've been with them how long already?"

"Almost a year…" Tenten sighed. "Honestly, I've gotten used to them…I just wish Lee and Gai-sensei were more mature, like Neji…"

"And yet he's the one to start the fights…" That doesn't sound mature to me…

Tenten laughed awkwardly. "Excluding that, I mean."

"So…" I adjusted my glasses. "What are your thoughts on shurikenjutsu?"

"I prefer bukijutsu and fūinjutsu." Whoop, there it is. "Since you asked that, I assume you're into shurikenjutsu?"

I nodded my head. "Yes!"

"How does that work?" Tenten looked questioningly at me. "The glasses, I mean…"

"I have hyperopia, so I'm good at seeing things that are far away," I replied. "Up close—not so much…"

"I see…" Tenten nodded her head. "Do you have a preference in weapons?"

One question led to another, and Tenten and I ended up having a rather animated discussion about weapons. We talked about their pros and cons, in which I learned a lot from Tenten about some of the weapons she used. Overall, I had a good time talking to Tenten.

Meanwhile with the others, Kakashi took to ignoring Gai via *Icha Icha Paradise*, Neji and Sasuke
were catching up, with Lee attempting to join in the conversation, and Naruto was running around
the living room, giving Michiko a piggyback ride. There wasn't much to do at this point, as we were
now just waiting for Iwai to wake up, which he did after thirty minutes.

"I see the entire place is still in one piece…" Iwai said as he walked down the stairs.

"Fortunately!" Tenten was quick to say, laughing nervously afterwards. "So…how are you feeling?"


"I walked on the ceiling!" Michiko exclaimed.

…Iwai face palmed. "Michiko, didn't I tell you to stop doing that?"

Are you telling me that this wasn't the first time she's done that?!

"But no one got hurt this time!" Michiko protested. "And I…I just want you to stop pushing
yourself…"

Iwai arched his brow. "What do you mean…?"

"It's my fault you hurt your arm…" Michiko frowned. "You're always doing things for me, so…I
want to do something for you. Tou-chan…can I be a kunoichi like Tenten-nee-chan?"

…I s-s-swear I didn't say anything to her!" Tenten sputtered.

Iwai shook his head and sighed. "I know that…the most you've done is answer her questions, but
this—this is all her. And just…if they were still alive, I don't think Ina and Ieyasu would be happy to
hear that Michiko would want to take up a career path such as that. And yet, if it's what Michiko
wants…who am I to stop her?"

Michiko's eyes widened. "So I can?!!"

"When you're old enough, but yeah…" Iwai sighed as he tugged down on his cap.

"Yaaay!" Michiko grinned widely, her shark-like teeth gleaming in the light.

"Man, you definitely take after me…heh." Iwai smiled, revealing a set of shark-like teeth that were
similar to his daughter's teeth.

The more I look at those teeth, the more jealous I get of them. In any case, at least things turned out
well in the end.

…

We left the Munehisa weapons shop afterwards, with Team Gai following us all the way back to the
Mission Assignment Desk at the Academy. We were all just about ready to go our separate ways
after we had received our pay when Gai decided to invite us out to dinner.

"Chōko?" Kakashi looked at me. "A little help?"

I didn't even hesitate to take out a smoke bomb from my pocket and detonate it. Kakashi, Sasuke,
Naruto, and I immediately dispersed after that, leaving Team Gai behind, most likely in confusion. Had we not been stuck with Team Gai all day, I'm sure we would have accepted Gai's offer.

For now, we just wanted to get the fuck away from Konoha's Green Beast. Nine hours with the guy can do that to a person.

…

…

Come the next day, in which I did end up feeling the pain from yesterday's higher than usual kick that Lee caught in his hand (OW), the Sandaime gave us another goddamned babysitting mission. The only thing keeping me from breaking the door, aside from Kakashi, was the fact that the request was from Masamune again. He needed help with Kazuichi, which shouldn't be too bad.

Except when we got to the Manabe household, we found out that Kazuichi wasn't alone. Michiko was there and the reason for that was because Iwai decided to take up his father's offer and leave Michiko with him. It gave Kazuichi the opportunity to interact with his cousin and gave Iwai one less thing to do while his arm was still healing from its sprain. Team Gai was still helping him with weapon shop assistance, by the way.

Kakashi was quite thankful for that because I honestly don't think he would have been able to last another nine hours with Gai in that shop. I mean, there really isn't much to do there. It's one of the reasons that made babysitting Michiko a boring job. I can see why she likes it when Lee and Neji fight…

Honestly, giving Michiko to Masamune was by far the best idea Iwai could have made, as Kazuichi was having the time of his life connecting with his cousin—especially since they shared the same teeth. It definitely gave him a boost in his self-esteem. Michiko also had a new area to explore, so she wasn't trying to make anyone fight nor was she trying to walk up the ceiling again.

While I still don't appreciate the fact the Sandaime keeps putting us on babysitting duty, I'm at least glad that Naruto hasn't been receiving any of the usual cold stares that come from adults and their children. If anything, these missions have been making it easier for Naruto to make a good impression on everyone.

I wonder if this was Sarutobi's intent…

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, got a little OC-centric in this chapter, but hey, that’s what happens when OCs that were just meant to be references get fleshed out. I mean, I never intended for those OCs to be connected in such a manner, especially when it came to Tenten having family. Speaking of Tenten, I just wanted to give her a chance to stand out for once.

By the by, after the last chapter, someone did a thing and I feel the need to bring it up again! Vampirelover12100 drew a really cute picture of Chōko! You can find the link to it here: http://vampirelover12100.deviantart.com/art/Akimichi-Choko-517005280

And just…thank you so much! I really appreciate stuff like this. Just…I’m touched.
That aside, I hope I didn’t botch up anyone’s character in this chapter, because let me just say that I have a long ways to go when it comes to Gai and Lee. I BLAME THE SPIN-OFF FOR THAT! DX Seriously, after watching so many episodes of Rock Lee’s Springtime of Youth, it just makes it difficult to remember Lee and Gai’s original characterizations.

Also, to bring up a point in the case of that roundhouse kick, when you’re trying to do one to the head, height becomes really obvious. It’s hard to ignore, especially if your kicks are still limited because you can’t kick that high yet (it takes time, but it does improve). Another thing I’d like to bring up was, back when I was going to Taekwondo practice, some of the stretches we were doing for warm-ups involved doing the splits. It was painful…and the intent for the splits was for it to eventually help in improving how high you can kick. Little by little, as your flexibility improves, so do your kicks. Of course, don’t take my word for it too much, as I am but a blue belt who still has a lot to learn.

Anyways, since I fleshed out these OCs, expect them to make reoccurring appearances. Iwai, being the owner of a weapon shop, is a given. By the way, has anyone been getting the references from these OCs yet? Because, apart from Miku, Kiku, Riku, and Michiko, everyone has been a reference to something…really, it’s there.

Now that this chapter is done, I can very much guarantee the end of these misadventures in babysitting as the next chapter will definitely bring us back to the actual plot. I’m sure everyone’s been waiting for it. I know I have.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! I will try to get the next one up soon, so until next time everyone!
"Tie your promises to the sky in a ribbon,

Filled with all sorts of wishes!

The spring wind blows at your heart,

But in the hand you make promises with, floats down a sakura!"

The sound of cheering children soon fills the air as I tried my best to catch my breath. Yes, I was singing just now…except I wasn't the only one—no. I got like a dozen children with me—all orphans. Why are there so many orphans with me? Well, orphans are a common sight at the Konohagakure orphanage, which was where Team 7 was.

After we finished babysitting Kazuichi and Michiko, the Sandaime decided that we had had enough experience to move us onto the orphanage, where today marked our seventh week of working here. We have not seen a return to Masamune's, after Iwai and Masamune decided to help each other out with Michiko and Kazuichi after we had finished babysitting them. And Tae has not been in need of babysitters, so she was, presumably, doing fine.

Meanwhile with Team 7, we were dealing with pure hell during our first two weeks at the orphanage. The caretakers kept glaring at Naruto, even though he wasn't doing anything wrong. And some of the orphans were just being mean to the poor boy.

Sasuke just got swarmed by a bunch of smitten little girls. I kept getting my hair pulled because long braids plus children equals pain. I'm not even gonna mention how many times my glasses were taken from me…

And Kakashi did nothing but watched!

…

Okay, maybe he did step in when some of the orphanage's caretakers were gossiping about Naruto behind his back. He was also there to retrieve my glasses for me whenever the children stole them. And Sasuke was on his own, because he usually resorted to a transformation technique and became one with the orphans until they discovered one of them just didn't belong.

Then I managed to pull a successful One Thousand and One Nights with the orphans during story time, in which everyone was being a little shit, and since then, everyone has mellowed out a bit. They had to, if they wanted to know what happened next.

Things got easier after that, now that the orphans gave Naruto a chance and actually got to know him. They were pretty friendly to him after that and some have actually defend Naruto from the caretakers.

The little girls gave Sasuke his much-needed space, but they still followed him like a bunch of ducklings. Aaaand I got stuck with the impatient ones who kept bugging me to continue the story for them. I decided to do something else and that's how singing time with Chōko became a thing. Because I had nothing else to show children that doesn't involve me spitting balls of condensed water
into the air or at random targets the children gave me to shoot at.

That was pretty much how it has been for us after the beginning two weeks. Naruto had a following amongst mischievous children, who he would teach how to prank the caretakers. Call it getting even with the caretakers. They were only lucky that it wasn't Naruto pulling said pranks…

As for Sasuke, more often than not, he was seen with his ducklings (as we liked to call them). He was usually coloring with them or playing house. Sometimes it turned into an intense game of hide-and-seek, in which everyone got involved.

During our days off, Kakashi decided to start training us and by training us, he kept making me climb up a tree to fetch a kunai of his and each time I returned it to him, he kept aiming it higher and higher until I got stuck. I would then get left in that tree for a good fifteen minutes (sometimes, longer than that), while Kakashi focused on Naruto and Sasuke. Kakashi was trying to help Naruto improve his chakra control, because it was shit. And Sasuke… was just practicing, because Kakashi really had nothing much to teach him… not yet, at least. Kakashi wanted Naruto to catch up with us, in terms of chakra control, and also wanted to slowly phase me out of my fear of falling.

I came close to crying many times. A few times, I did cry. One time, it was because my glasses fell off when I was actually trying to climb down the tree after I got stuck. It was a pretty horrifying experience for me, because like hell I trusted my shitty eyesight when I was trying to climb down a fucking tree at a high height!

Another time, it was because my braid got stuck on a branch and I was in a position where I couldn't fix that. It was somewhat painful and just plain scary to be in such a position, just standing on the middle of a branch, with the end of your braid stuck on the branch a few feet above you. I have since contemplated on cutting my hair, as its long length was starting to become an inconvenience for me. I mean, I'm no Bayonetta, so I really can't do anything with my long hair. I seriously wondered how Ino did it, with her long blonde hair in a ponytail. Then again, my hair was longer than hers was, but I digress.

And a third time, it was because of an unfortunate encounter I had with a random snake I came across while climbing down a tree. I just freaked out and let go of everything. I was falling, with my arms flailing in the air because I just finished having bad flashbacks of my encounter with Orochimaru and being plunged into one fear after another was not good for one's mental health.

In all of those cases, Kakashi was the one to bail me out, as it was his job to make sure his Genin were safe. He called it a day after that because the health of his Genin mattered to him. It's the one reason why he put limits on Naruto, despite his immense stamina. The same went with Sasuke, who was rather annoyed, but understood that Kakashi meant well.

Hanabi and Sakura's birthdays came and went, with little Hanabi turning seven years old and Sakura being the third person, out of our circle of friends, to turn thirteen (excluding Neji, who was thirteen going on fourteen, and Gaara's siblings). The month was almost over, and, all together, we had spent at least two months doing D-ranked missions.

Come the next day, the Sandaime finally relieved us of our caretaking duties and allowed us the freedom of choosing our D-rank mission. And it just so happened that Naruto picked the one that sent us all over Konoha, looking for Tora the Cat. I should have expected this day to come, but two months of watching over children can do a lot to a person.

I didn't even bother questioning the wireless radios we had to use to keep in touch with each other while we searched for Tora. I had enough headaches trying to understand how technology even works in this damn world, thank you very much. It was just best to leave it be.
"What's the distance to the target?" Kakashi spoke to us via wireless radio.

"Five meters." Naruto responded. "I'm ready anytime- tebayo."

"So am I," Sasuke remarked.

"Me too..." I said.

Honestly, this entire mission was just ridiculous. We went from looking throughout town for a fucking cat to eventually finding ourselves in the forest. This was where our search led us to, and we've been at it since this morning. It wasn't even noon and I already wanted to call it a day.

"Okay... go!" Kakashi gave us the signal.

Sasuke, Naruto, and I reacted immediately, jumping out of our hiding spots in an attempt to catch the stupid feline that kept avoiding us. This was our eighth attempt already, and if we didn't catch that cat now, I was going to scream. Thankfully, a well-timed tackle from Naruto apprehended Tora successfully.

"I got you!" Naruto loudly exclaimed.

The light brown cat in his arms yowled loudly and tried to claw her way out desperately, but to no avail.

"Does it have a ribbon on its right ear?" Kakashi asked us. "Are you sure this is the target, Tora?"

We might have caught the wrong cat a few times, so Kakashi had every reason to ask us that question...

Sasuke took one look at the cat scratching at Naruto's face and said, "Yeah, we're sure."

"Owowowowow!" Naruto yelped as Tora continued to scratch his face. I'm honestly surprised he managed to keep his hold on Tora. I do not envy him one bit.

I've had enough experiences with cats in my past life to know how much it hurts to get scratched. And while I could have helped Naruto out, I didn't want those claws getting stuck in my bandages or messing them up.

"Good," Kakashi said. "Operation Capture Tora the Lost Pet complete."

About a few seconds afterwards, Kakashi, Sasuke, and I were treated to Naruto's loud voice blasting our ears as he yelled, "Isn't there a more exciting mission we can work on?!"

The knucklehead forgot that his radio was still on...fucking oww.

...

Fast-forward to twenty minutes later, and Team 7 was greeted with the sight of the Fire Daimyo's wife, Madam Shijimi, rubbing her cheek against Tora's face as the cat yowled and struggled to get out of her grip.

"Ohh, my cute Tora-chan!" Madam Shijimi was quite oblivious to her cat's distress. "I was so
worried about you!"

My expression was blank as Sasuke treated the scratches on my arms, with Naruto laughing at the sight of Tora getting what she very well deserved...in his opinion. Meanwhile with me, I was resisting the urge to slap Naruto upside the head for flinging Tora at me on our way back to the Academy. He couldn't take Tora's scratching any longer and I happened to be the closest to him at the time. What happened afterward was the very thing I wanted to avoid, and that was Tora's claws getting stuck on my arm's bandages.

I was only fortunate that the Academy wasn't that far off, because until we arrived, I was stuck with this stupid cat on my arms. Kakashi had to use a kunai to cut my bandages off so we could free Tora, who was then promptly handed off to her owner.

"How much longer?" I asked Sasuke.

"A little more..." If there was one thing I was glad about Sasuke, it was that his curiosity led him to using his Sharingan to copying a medic-nin technique Sakura had used to heal a scrape Ino had gotten during sparring practice back in our Academy days. The outcome from that was that Sasuke learned the technique, which was the Mystical Palm Jutsu.

It doesn't end there, as actually using it was a different story, because for Sasuke to use the Mystical Palm Jutsu, he needed a shit-ton of practice, of which Sakura was happy to help with. And it was thanks to Sakura, as well as Natsu, that Sasuke had some basic medic-nin training. Sasuke still had a lot to learn, but it was enough for him to apply simple first aid, as he is now, healing the scratches on my arms.

In hindsight, I find it funny that Sasuke is basically the Sakura of this Team 7, in the sense that he is capable of healing. At the same time, I'm extremely glad that it was his freaking curiosity that got him this far into learning something that I probably should have considered, but never got around to because I was too busy putting focus into my taijutsu and shurikenjutsu. And like hell anyone was trusting Naruto to learn medical ninjutsu, as that alone requires advanced chakra control, which he does not have.

"Hey, Jiji, what do we do now-ttebayo?" Naruto looked at the Sandaime for a response.

"Can we please get something that doesn't involve cats?" I asked, almost pleadingly.

"Well...you could try and babysit the chief counsellor's three-year-old, or would you rather go back to the orphanage—" Sarutobi was cut off as Naruto, Sasuke, and I yelled, "NO!"

"No more babysitting missions, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaimed.

Sasuke nodded his head. "We've done enough of that already, give us something new!"

"I swear, if I have to tell the story about the flying carpet again, I am going to snap!" I have limits, dammit!

..."Well, in that case, how about messenger duty?" the Sandaime suggested. "Or what about shopping in the neighboring village? I see that some farmers have put in request for help in digging up the potatoes..."

"No, no, no!" Naruto crossed his arms in front of himself in an X-shaped formation. "Find us a better mission, dattebayo!"
I wasn't that surprised to see Iruka slam his hands down on the table when he stood up from his seat to reprimand Naruto.

"You idiot, you're still just a rookie!" Iruka snapped. "Everyone needs to start with the easy missions to gain experience!"

Naruto growled. "I know that already, but we've been doing D-ranks since we graduated!"

"It's been almost three months since then..." I muttered under my breath. By now, Sasuke had finished healing my arms, so I was now in the process of re-bandaging them.

Sasuke sighed in exasperation. "At least give us a C-rank! I'm sure we've done enough for one!"

... "Maa, it seems my adorable Genin have made their decision," Kakashi remarked, catching Naruto, Sasuke, and I by surprise. "Are there any available C-rank missions that are of their level?"

Seconds after saying that, Naruto, Sasuke, and I latched onto Kakashi, hugging him as tight as we could, in an attempt to show him our gratitude. Kakashi just sighed and patted each of us on the head.

"Well, there is a C-rank mission that we have recently received," the Sandaime said as he pulled out the correct mission scroll. "You are to be bodyguards for this client."

Naruto was quick to let go of Kakashi as he turned to face the Sandaime. "Bodyguards...? Who are we gonna watch?! Is it someone important, like a princess, dattebayo?!"

"Now let's not get too hasty." The Sandaime chuckled. "You'll eventually get there—just not now."

"Damn straight!" Naruto nodded his head. "So...who are they-ttebayo?"

"I'll introduce you to him." When the Sandaime asked for our client to be sent into the room shortly after saying that, I was hyped up.

Then our client walked into the room and hype turned into regret because our client was Tazuna, the master bridge builder from the Land of Waves. I have no idea how long Team 7 was doing D-ranks in canon before the C-rank mission to the Land of Waves. At this point, it doesn't really matter because all of that is irrelevant, now that Tazuna is here.

"Motherfucker..." I swore, earning a light bonk to the head from Kakashi.

"What? They're all kids!" And it seems Tazuna has finally realized who his bodyguards are. Coming from a civilian, such a comment wasn't as insulting as it could have been.

"Uh, sir, are you drunk?" I asked as I watched Tazuna take a long drink from his bottle of sake.

"No." Tazuna let out a puff of air after that, his face somewhat flushed from drinking. "Not yet, at least."

Joy. "I'm not carrying you if you pass out."

"You probably couldn't, even if you want to, little girl." Yup, typical response from a civilian.

I am so done, you don't even know...
When Mama found out that my team received a C-rank mission, shortly after I returned home to pack, she wasn’t surprised or anything. She just hugged me, wished me good luck, and directed me to the sealing scrolls I was most likely going to need for this mission. I was oddly calm as I went to my room, carrying five scrolls in my arms.

I might have went heavy on the amount of ration packs I stuffed into my backpack, but only because I’d rather my teammates not depend on the nasty-ass ration bars that were usually sold at the market. The Akimichi made their own ration bars, which were certainly far more tasty than the average ration bar (trust me, I know), while still being nutritious as ever.

I packed in an extra set of clothes in my backpack, and stored two more sets in a scroll, just for a good measure. It was going to be a looong mission, so it would be nice to alternate, for the sake of hygiene. I also added a roll of bandages to my backpack, just in case I needed to replace my bandages, as I had to earlier after my encounter with Tora the Cat.

I may or may not have started to get a little paranoid when I stored two sets of kunai and shuriken into a different scroll, adding in a set of senbon afterwards, just in case I needed to rely on precise hits. My heart started to speed up when I noticed I was running low on smoke bombs, but I quickly focused my attention on storing an adequate amount of soldier pills into another scroll, that I had dubbed the first aid scroll, as there was definitely a first-aid kit in it.

I deliberately left two of the remaining five sealing scrolls unused. I would find use for them later. For now, into my backpack they go! I made sure my backpack was securely closed afterwards, because it would be a shame for anything to fall out because of my negligence.

With my backpack packed and ready, I took the time to take a bathroom break before changing into a clean set of clothes. I refilled my weapon holster, making sure it was full of sharp shuriken and kunai. I have never felt so happy to see something so sharp and deadly in my possession, but I consider that a sign that the paranoia was starting to take its toll on me.

I checked myself in the mirror afterwards, adjusted my glasses and scarf—looking good Chōko! Boost in self-esteem accomplished. It's always nice to feel good about yourself, especially in such a situation as mine.

I made an attempt to wear my hitai-ate on my forehead, since my scarf mostly hid it. I thought it would be better if my hitai-ate was visible at all times, but wearing it on my forehead felt too awkward with my glasses, so I back to my neck it went. I could just tie it around my arm like Shikamaru, or wear it like a belt, but I honestly felt safer with it around my neck (I hate leaving my neck exposed). Otherwise, I'd worry about it falling off without me noticing. I'm like that…

I grabbed my backpack and put it on, its weight moving me back a few steps. While it doesn't feel heavy (to me, at least), it certainly has enough weight to throw me off my balance. I considered that a good thing, but that was probably the nostalgia talking. I was used to hefting a heavy backpack on my back in my past life, thanks to school. Ahh, good times…

I looked in the mirror once more, gave myself another boost in my self-esteem, and then left the room. I made my way over to Mama, who made sure to double-check my backpack for me. She didn't question my reasons for excess weaponry, nor the many ration packs. In fact, Mama ended up packing another sealing scroll into my backpack, saying that it was full of ration packs.
"Make sure to eat whenever you're hungry," Mama told me as she closed my backpack. "Stay hydrated and don't hesitate to use full strength whenever the situation calls for it."

"I w-won't!" My voice was a little shaky, if only because I was nervous. "I love you."

Mama blinked and smiled as she picked me up in a warm embrace. "I love you too!"

It feels nice to be loved… I almost feel like crying right now because of how fucking scared I am.

"Give Tou-chan and Chōji my love," I said after Mama put me down. "B-Bye!"

I ran out of the house after that, my heart pounding as I made my way to the marketplace district. I still had some time before our meet-up time with our client at one of the gates. I was quick to pull out a sealing scroll from my backpack in order to store the numerous smoke bombs I bought from one of the stores. I made sure they were the good quality kinds, ones that lasted longer in obscuring vision, with some of them containing sleeping gas. Cheap smoke bombs were good for quick getaways and small distractions, good quality smoke bombs were good for battles due to their duration.

I ended up paying the Munehisa weapons shop a visit to buy another set of kunai and shuriken, because having two sets of each was STILL not enough for me. My mind was literally repeating the word, "Nope!" over and over again. Even as I approached the specified gate, where Naruto, Sasuke, and Tazuna were already waiting at, the word continued to repeat.

Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope!

"Are you okay-ttebayo?" Naruto asked me, looking somewhat concerned.

I was noping so hard, mentally, that I nearly told Naruto, "Nope!" as my response to his question. Luckily, I managed to allow myself a moment to compose myself before saying, "I'm fine!"

Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope!

You know, like a liar, because my mind is still saying otherwise. I'm surprised Sasuke and Naruto haven't caught on, or maybe they have, which is why Sasuke is patting me on the back, saying that everything is going to be okay.

"You know, this is gonna be our first time out of Konoha like this-ttebayo," Naruto brought up. "Aren't you excited?"

Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope!

Please ask again later when I'm not noping.

"I doubt it when she's this tense…" Sasuke remarked. "Seriously, it's going to be fine! Kakashi will make sure of that!"

"I will, too!" Naruto exclaimed. "And Sasuke, too!"

"No crap." Sasuke huffed. "Where the hell is Kakashi, anyways?"

"Yo." It took every fiber of my being to keep myself from screaming when Kakashi suddenly appeared behind us. "Sorry if I was late, I was making sure the house was locked up and secured."

That was not a fucking lie. Kakashi was being honest for once with his excuse. Though, he may have taken a small detour afterwards to pay the Memorial Rock a visit, but yeah, Kakashi was not lying.
"Did you water Shisui?!" I quickly turned to Naruto, who was quick to nod. "What about your other plants?"

"They're all fine, Chôko-chan!" Naruto reassured me. "Wow, you're really tense-ttebayo."

"Here, have some daifuku," Kakashi said as he handed me a pack of green tea daifuku. "Try to eat slow and calmly. Wouldn't want you throwing up, now would we?"

I shook my head and slowly opened the pack of daifuku. It was honestly comforting, just seeing that Kakashi was trying his best to ease my nerves. He ended up doing the same with Sasuke, just placing a ripe tomato into the Uchiha's hand. Sasuke didn't even wait to take a bite out of his tomato.

As for Naruto, Kakashi just ruffled the blond's hair and said he had a few packs of instant ramen on him. Naruto was ecstatic to hear that and just pulled Kakashi into a spine-cracking hug. I was amazed at how well composed Kakashi appeared despite the hug Naruto gave him.

"Hey, am I really going to be safe with these brats?" Tazuna suddenly asked Kakashi.

Kakashi just smiled at Tazuna and said, "You couldn't have asked for a better team!"

I felt my face heat up as I chewed on a piece of daifuku. Did Kakashi have that much faith in us?

"Damn straight, dattebayo!" Naruto agreed with Kakashi.

Sasuke just stayed silent and took another bite out of his tomato.

"I am a Jounin, in case you're still worried!" Kakashi assured Tazuna. "Now I trust everyone has packed correctly?"

"You wouldn't let us leave the house until you were sure we did, dattebayo!" Naruto complained. "Now let's go, let's go, let's go-ttebayo!"

Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope!

Someone get me out of here!

I spent the entire afternoon scouting the ground for any suspicious puddles, because fuck—I was paranoid!

This earned me a few stares from Sasuke, who had been keeping a close eye on me since he noticed I was inwardly freaking out. Naruto was too busy enjoying the view, as this was his first time outside of Konoha. Kakashi kept a close eye on all of us, while Tazuna seemed to make a drinking game out of every little thing Sasuke, Naruto, and I did that was worth questioning our status as shinobi. Considering his current position, I wouldn't blame him for drinking.

I was on edge the entire time, even up to the point when we were setting up camp. It was some time before dusk, and I was just looking at every bush around us with the highest suspicion. It got to the point that when I heard something rustle, I immediately flung five kunai into the bush and, well…I hit a rabbit. So, ah…dinner was on me?

Kakashi ruffled my hair before going to fetch the rabbit I accidentally killed. He was probably telling me to calm down. And dammit—I was trying, but I was still freaking out over the fact that we
could die at any given moment because this C-rank will eventually escalate into something else.

Tazuna was setting up the fire, Sasuke managed to keep a straight face as he skinned the rabbit Kakashi had handed him, and Naruto was doing who knows what. He just up and left without saying anything. This was before I had killed the rabbit (Elmer Fudd, eat your heart out), so I assume he’s hunting for dinner.

About fifteen minutes later, Naruto came back with a rabbit and nearly dropped it when he saw that we already had a rabbit on us. He almost asked where we got when Sasuke just pointed at me, like the rude little boy he was.

"She freaked and accidentally killed a rabbit," Sasuke explained.

"How do you 'accidentally' kill a rabbit-ttebayo?!" Naruto was baffled.

"I just did, okay?!" Get off my case, dammit! We're only lucky that it was a rabbit I had killed, because if it wasn't…yeesh, I just got goosebumps.

"What matters is that Chōko-chan helped with dinner!" Kakashi tried to change the subject. "Now go help Sasuke out, Naruto."

Naruto muttered under his breath and walked over to Sasuke, who just held out his hand for the rabbit. Meanwhile with me, I was sitting down on the ground, with my knees brought up to my chest. I was munching on a ration bar, trying my best to seem calm and failing horribly. Then again, I don't like watching animals get skinned in front of me (eww, eww, gross, gross).

"Let's try turning away from the gore, Chōko," Kakashi said as he turned me around. "Now is there anything you want to tell me that's on your mind?"

Oh crap, English…he definitely doesn't want Tazuna listening in on us. "I'm fine."

"Chōko, you've been holding that kunai for the past thirty minutes," Kakashi said before taking the kunai out of my hand. "You're starting to worry our client."

"I'm sorry, I'm just worried about everything going wrong…" A huge understatement, but I'm not lying. "I mean, this is our first time out of Konoha. The last time we've even approach the gate was when Itachi-san…"

"No need to say anymore," Kakashi stopped me.

"I need help…" This is seriously not good for my mental health. I took another bite out of my ration bar and just looked down. I wasn't paying much attention after that, because the next thing I knew, I was face-to-face with a pug.

"Chōko, meet Pakkun," Kakashi said as he held out the pug in front of my face. "Pakkun, meet my cute little Genin, Chōko—"

My loud squealing interrupted Kakashi as I just latched onto Pakkun and embraced him. "Puuuuuuuuuuuuug!"

Oh my god, I love pugs so much, you don't even know—aaaaahhhhh~!

"Not so tight!" Pakkun's gruff voice nearly caught me off-guard, but I was too ecstatic over the fact that I was hugging a pug. Though, I at least loosened my embrace on him, since I didn't want to be
harming the little guy.

I honestly should be taking Pakkun seriously, since he is a ninken, but dammit, he just looks so cute~! Oh you are so cute, yes you are— "Yes?"

I am vaguely aware of the strange looks I'm getting from everyone, excluding Kakashi, who just seems like he wants to say something. He cleared his throat, ignoring a very vocal Pakkun, who was now struggling to get out of my grip. I'm starting to think that my brother-in-law from my past life had a point about me being like Elmyra from *Tiny Toons*…

"Now I trust the two of you will get along—Pakkun, don't bite her." Kakashi flicked Pakkun on the nose before his teeth sunk into my arm. "I need you to behave and maybe let her touch your paw pads."

Pakkun only muttered in annoyance as I began to nuzzle him. I dunno about you, but ever since Kakashi gave me this little guy, I certainly feel a *lot* better. Pakkun is not a battle-type ninken, and I am very much aware of that. I am *also* aware that he possesses a sharp sense of smell and that alone just gives me the reassurance I need to stay calm. I won't have to worry about anyone sneaking up on us with this little guy out here!

Dinner was honestly better than it could have been, had Kakashi not taken out Pakkun. Naruto kept trying to pet Pakkun, only to get his hand nearly bitten by the pug. Sasuke tried the same tactic and just when he managed to successfully pet Pakkun, his hand got bitten…*hard*. This earned him laughter from Kakashi, Naruto, Tazuna, and I, while he healed his bite.

"Just so you guys know…I hate you." Oh Sasuke, we know you don't mean it!

"We love you too!" I nearly got slapped for saying that, but Pakkun came in for me and bit Sasuke again.

"I'm gonna kill that mutt!" Sasuke yelled before promptly getting restrained by Kakashi.

And so came an end to our first day doing a C-rank mission. It's gonna escalate eventually, but I'm gonna try to enjoy the peace there is right there before shit hits the whirling device. Hopefully, night watch isn't as stressful as I assumed it would be. I doubt I'll be able to sleep at all, tonight…

Stupid insomnia…

Chapter End Notes

Chôko may or may not be paranoid for the first few days of the C-rank mission. Expect her to go into attack-mode when prompted to, like with the rabbit. Again, she's got everything to worry about, especially considering her past. Naruto is currently on a high that is seeing new sights, which he considers exciting after those two months of caretaking.

And Sasuke is just being Sasuke, as usual, but blame the childcare as a result of that. He just wants to go on a mission that doesn't result ANYONE developing a crush on him. Oh, and he may or may not have a future career as a medic, since stuff happened and yeah…
By the by, someone else also did me a thing! Sainganin.San drew a cute picture of Chōko with bed hair! The link to the picture is here: http://mirikon.deviantart.com/art/Bedhead-Choko-518777127

I'm happy. Like, so happy, I can't even word right. Thank you so much! I really appreciate the effort put into it! ^^

Moving on, Chōko's ophidiophobia may also have traces of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Let me just say this as someone who has had experience with PTSD. Flashbacks are scary…they just are and I've nearly freaked out a couple of times when I got them.

If anyone is concerned about what happened to me, nothing serious really happened. It was just a minor car accident where I bumped into the back of someone's bumper, nothing else. The entire accident was just emotionally distressing for me, but really, no one got hurt.

That's enough about my life. I promise a much longer chapter come next update! I hope everyone enjoyed this chapter, so until next time, everyone!
To say that I was feeling great the next morning would be a fucking lie. I didn't sleep...at all. I stayed up all night, keeping watch while everyone else slept. Naruto and Sasuke did try to relieve me of my duty a few times, but I told them not to bother, since there was no way my insomnia was going to let me sleep. Although, Kakashi did stay with me for the morning watch, just in case I passed out from sleep deprivation. It was a genuine concern and, truth be told, I'm glad Kakashi was with me for the morning watch.

The night watch was creepy as hell. My past life kept bugging me with memories of me watching horror movies. Like, I abhor horror movies with a passion, especially if they're slasher films. Of course, I only have my curiosity to blame for getting me to watch a good amount of the Friday the 13th series as well as Halloween. Once the memories started popping up, night watch went from manageable to downright creepy. And by creepy, I mean creepy, in the sense that camping out at night, in the middle of a forest, just screamed horror movie material. Stupid horror movies and their stupid clichés, keeping me on the edge for no good reason...

Morning watch was the complete opposite once I had calmed down, with a little help from Kakashi. I found the morning air to be rather refreshing, unlike Naruto, whose complaints said otherwise as he muttered in his sleep. The ambience that I previously considered creepy was now calming to my senses. I might have spaced out a few times just staring at the scenery of my surroundings...

I nearly stabbed Kakashi with a kunai when he decided to test my reflexes while I was spaced out. He scared the crap out of me, the bastard...

Even though I had calmed down considerably, in comparison to yesterday, the anxiety was still there. I had a difficult time eating breakfast because of how nauseous I felt. Breakfast, by the way, consisted of ration bars because hunting would take too much time. If we wanted to make it to the Land of Waves without any delays, we needed to leave as soon as possible while it was still bright outside. With a civilian in our care, daylight was a necessity for travel.

As we were packing up, Kakashi took special care in teaching us how to effectively cover our tracks, for future references. We left immediately after that.

...

I still kept a close eye on the ground for any suspicious puddles as the day went by. The sun was shining and the temperature was moderately warm, both of which were appropriate for the season of spring. Of course, moderately warm will eventually change to uncomfortably hot with the approach of summer, which was like a couple of months away.

I'm not looking forward to summer, for various reasons, apart from the weather. With summer, also came the Chuunin exams. The Chuunin exams are held twice a year. Between late spring and summer and between late autumn and winter are the times when they are usually held. It depended on the location.

I know Konoha was going to be hosting one of this year's Chuunin exams. I just didn't know when. It was a little disconcerting and knowing Kakashi, he was most definitely going to volunteer our team for the exams. And if my memory served me well, we were going to get a huge blast from the
past come these exams. I shuddered as unpleasant memories suddenly plagued my mind.

"Are you okay, Chōko-chan?" Naruto asked me, having noticed my distress.

"A bit…" I inhaled deeply and then slowly exhaled. "I just recalled some unpleasant memories involving that guy… Give me a moment and I'll be fine."

Be gone, foul memories!

"Just what happened to her?" I heard Tazuna ask Kakashi.

"A lot," Kakashi simply said. "You could say it was traumatic, but I wasn't there for it."

Technically, Kakashi was telling the truth, since, to a majority of people, Kakashi and Hound were two different people. And barring that, Hound had arrived late before being promptly poisoned by Sasori, so he wasn't there to see a giant snake nearly crush me…

"We were," Sasuke remarked, gesturing at himself and Naruto. "But we rather not talk about it…"

Naruto nodded his head. "Yeah, it was a bad day-ttebayo…"

Tazuna stared at us for a moment before nodding his head. He understood how much of a touchy subject it was with us.

"Oh, and a friendly reminder, if any of you guys see a snake, tell me so that Chōko-chan doesn’t have to deal with it!" Kakashi was smiling and his tone had been cheery, but there was an underlying sense of seriousness in his words, which got his point across.

I thanked Kakashi after that before pulling out a half-eaten ration bar that was left over from this morning’s breakfast. I…did not eat a lot, so I was hoping to get some more food into my stomach. I felt relieved to see that my appetite had returned.

It's one thing being unable to sleep, but being unable to eat was seriously not good for my health. Hell, this stress was just not good for my health and I think Kakashi is onto me… That would probably explain why he brought out Pakkun.

"Kakashi-sensei?" I turned to Kakashi. "About Pakkun…"

"You want me to bring him out again?" Yup, definitely using Pakkun as a stress-reliever.

Hmm… "Later."

"Just keep that mutt away from me." Aww, is Sasuke still salty about that bite? "Do you really want to mess with the medic of this team?"

Oh shit, Sasuke just realized how valuable he is as the White Mage of the team. Wait, wouldn't he be more of a Paladin, since he has minor healing abilities and is more on the offensive? Eh, I guess Sasuke is more of a Cecil Harvey then a Rosa Joanna Farrell and—wait a fucking second.

Cecil Harvey is voiced by Yuri Lowenthal…Sasuke is voiced by Yuri Lowenthal…holy crap, brain, way to go and make that connection.

…

Cecil Harvey should come off as Seshiru Hāvi, so Hāvi Seshiru it is… Hahaha, I found a fake name for Sasuke if he ever needs one! Man, I'm good! Duuude, I need to see what else I could do!
Okay, let's start with Naruto! C'mon, brain, let's see how far our time looking at all of those wiki pages will get us and—oh god dammit, I knew this was eventually going to tie back into Yu-Gi-Oh. I just didn't think Japanese voice actors would have done that alone and not the abridged series…

Well, fake name for Naruto is now Kaiba Mokuba, and let's work on Kakashi! Crap…that's a lot of potential fake names. Welp, my work is done…wait, what was going on again?

"You blanked out, didn't you?" Sasuke looked blankly at me.

"Yes." I didn't even hesitate to answer Sasuke's question. "I totally did and I thought up a fake name for you if you ever need it…you too, Naruto."

"Really, what is it-ttebayo?" Naruto looked expectantly at me.

"Nah, I'm saving it when we need it." Probably on a different mission, who knows? "By the way, if you ever need a fake identity, Kakashi-sensei, I'm your girl."

"I'll keep that in mind…I'll keep that in mind…you feeling better?" Nice to see you're still concerned about me.

"Yup!" I certainly feel happy.

"Are they always like this?" Crap, I forgot Tazuna is with us.

"Oh, for the most part, yes," Kakashi replied. "And before you ask, yes, she has a tendency to blank out like that. Try not to get too surprised when she blurts out something."

Tazuna stared at Kakashi for a good minute before taking a drink out of his sake bottle. I'm surprised he still had some in there, or maybe he had another bottle on him. Certainly seems like it…

…

The rest of the day went without any hassles, though I still continued to keep a close eye for anything out of the ordinary. The next day brought in a repeat of yesterday's events, minus the part where I blanked out and teased Sasuke for getting bit by Pakkun. I wasn't going to piss off the Paladin of the team—fuck that.

Oh, and I still couldn't fall asleep. Sleep deprivation and paranoia do not mix, by the way. I was on edge come the fourth day. Everything stood out, my mood wasn't the best, and I already made it clear that I wanted no one to touch me. I didn't want to accidentally stab someone or punch them in the face—I was that tense.

By midafternoon, I noticed my vision beginning to blur, but then I realized Kakashi just took my glasses. Normally, I'd lash out against anyone who had taken my glasses, but I was too focused on my surroundings to do so. I'm keeping my out on you, puddles— "Aaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!"

I screamed loudly when I heard the sound of rattling chains. I immediately turned around and threw everything I had on me at the two missing-nin who stood at the ends of the spiked chain that was wrapped around Kakashi. I have no idea how long I was screaming and throwing kunai and shuriken, but eventually, everything went black.

…

…

When I woke up, I was rather disoriented. My head was pounding, and my body felt heavy, yet…I
was moving?

"Where am I?" My voice was sluggish and my vision was blurry, but that was probably because my glasses were missing and—hello, what is this silver fluffy thing I'm touching?

"That's my hair, Chōko." Oh...hey, Kakashi. "And to answer your question, I'm carrying you since you passed out. This is why sleep is important."

Well, excuse me for having insomnia!

"Are you going to stop touching my hair?" You're funny, Kakashi. "Well, since you're still awake, I guess I should tell you that you saved my life."

Oh that's nice—wait, what? "I did? Wait...what happened again?!

Because I'm pretty damn sure that the Kakashi wrapped up in those chains was a fake. Or did some divergence of some sort happen? Oh god, I don't even want to know...

"We're still going to Wave, dattebayo!" Naruto blurted out, making me focus on his figure, which appeared to me as an orange blur. He was close by, that's for sure.

"We'll tell you on the way," Sasuke remarked. While Naruto was an orange blur, Sasuke was blue... wait, aren't those colors like, complementary or opposite?

... Oh damn, this rivalry even extends to color.

"Oh, and Naruto?" Sasuke seemed to be carrying something on him, but shitty vision is shitty. "It's your turn to carry the backpack."

Backpack?

"But it's heavy!" Naruto complained.

Heavy...wait, is Sasuke carrying my backpack?

"How else was I going to carry you?" Kakashi remarked.

I need to stop talking out loud like this...

"You don't think I know?" Sasuke sounded annoyed. "Besides, it's been five minutes. It's your turn."

"Just take the backpack, brat." Tazuna was also annoyed, as well as anxious. Considering what happened before I passed out, I wouldn't blame him.

Meanwhile with me, my eyes are starting to feel heavy.

"Just go to sleep, Chōko," Kakashi told me. "It's going to be a long day."

You don't have to tell me twice, I actually feel sleepy for once and I'm not going to pass up sleep while I can get it...

...
I heard the entire story from Sasuke once I woke up, which was sometime after everyone had set up camp. I just sat up in my sleeping bag, wide-awake and alert. I ended up head-butting Naruto when I did that (oww), much to Sasuke's amusement. Kakashi is starting to rub off on Sasuke and I don't know whether I should find it funny or worry.

Speaking of Kakashi, he handed me my glasses before Sasuke told me what happened after I had passed out. It was as Kakashi had said, I had saved his life—and yet, something feels off, but I wasn't exactly in a position to question that. I hate it when that happens…

In any case, events of the canon kind occurred (for the most part), in which Team 7 and Tazuna got ambushed by the Demon Brothers, Gōzu and Meizu. Kakashi apparently made it a habit to memorize each and every update of Konohagakure's Bingo Books in his spare time, so that is where the information came from. Gōzu and Meizu were Chuunin-ranked missing-nin from Kirigakure and while they had attacked Kakashi first, their real target turned out to be Tazuna. Sasuke had been the one to come to that conclusion, as he had kept his attention on Tazuna during the ambush.

Sasuke was good at reading people when the situation called for it. It was enough for Tazuna to finally tell the truth. That confirmed that our C-rank mission finally escalated to what Kakashi estimated was a very expensive B-rank…at least. And even though this was a mission we literally didn't sign up for, we were still going to proceed because Naruto is determined to see this mission go from start to finish. Sasuke went along with it because he knew there was no convincing Naruto to change his mind after that.

Kakashi had been the one to finalize that, even though I was knocked out of the time.

"Nice to see that someone else can be leader for once." Truth be told, I'm relieved to have the responsibility shift over to someone else.

"We all know you're still leader—I'm just a stand-in." Kakashi, we all know very well that that's a damn lie. God, you are such a troll!

"So what's your story?" I asked Tazuna, who was in the midst of opening a new bottle of sake. Just how many of those bottles did he bring?

"Not enough, that's for sure…" God dammit, I need to stop saying stuff out loud. "And since you asked, I might as well tell you."

And out of the loop I no longer was! I had been informed about Gatou, who was a shipping magnate and the founder of Gatou Company. So, long story short, Tazuna needed protection because he was Wave's only hope for restoring economic stability and breaking Gatou's monopoly. And we got roped into it because Tazuna didn't have the funds for anything above a C-rank. Talk about our luck, and my brain keeps going into Spanish mode, because I keep thinking about cats when Gatou's name is mentioned. Thank you, Spanish, for ruining words that sound like other words in your language.

Of course, the pronunciation sounds more like the French word, gâteau, which means cake. And the more I think about it, the more correct it seems because gato and gâteau, while similar sounding, at first, have distinct differences overall and I am totally spacing out.

"I lost you, didn't I?" Oh man, Tazuna sounds pissed.

"No…I got the gist of it." Thank you information I already had! I honestly feel relieved that events are turning out the way they did in the manga…even if it meant getting attacked by those missing-nin —oh god, it's only going to get worse from here on out! There's still friggin' Zabuza and his giant sword we have to deal with—I totally want to call the Kubikiribōchō the Buster Sword and oh my
"Hey, Chōko, look who's here to say hello." Kakashi, don't ever sneak up on me like that and you are lucky I am not armed—what the hell is on top of my head?

"Hello," a gruff voice greeted me.

"Pakkun!" Oh my god, it's the pug! "How's it going?"

I don't know whether I should find it funny or sad that it is extremely easy for me to get distracted when an animal of my interest is involved. So I decided to just focus on the cute pug who sounded like an old man and just have a good time. Because in a couple of days, shit is going to hit the fan and I'd rather not let a repeat of today's events happen again...even if I did manage to save Kakashi's life.

I still feel as though I'm not getting told the entire story, but again, I'm not in a position to question it.

...  

...  

It was completely early in the morning when we took a small boat to the Land of Waves. We were now six days into this mission. It was chilly, deathly quiet, and especially foggy. You know, the only difference between mist and fog is visibility, so the fact that I could barely see that far away, even without my glasses, means that this was definitely fog.

It was like Silent Hill up in this shit and the silence wasn't helping with the already creepy ambience this fog created. It probably also didn't help that I know there was a part in one of the Silent Hill games where you had to use a boat to get across and just knowing that isn't making my situation any better.

"Ulp!" Also, my stomach was not taking too well to the boat trip. I do not like travel by boat...at all.

I have had only one experience with boats, and that was during my past life, when I traveled from England to France by boat (or ship, but whatever) and I did not have a good time with the constant rocking motion. Naruto was not helping, as every movement he made rocked the boat. Damn Naruto and his stupid curiosity for sightseeing...stop rocking the boat!

"How much longer?" I turned to the rower of the boat for an answer.

"We should be seeing the bridge soon," the rower replied. "It shouldn't be too far."

Considering the fact that we weren't using the boat's engine, it was going to take a little longer than usual to reach the Land of Waves. We were taking advantage of the fog to sneak into Wave without getting caught by Gatou. It was rather tense and—holy crap, that's a huge bridge!

"Wow, it's huge!" Dammit, Naruto, you are going to give our position away if you don't keep your mouth shut!

"Shut up, idiot!" Sasuke hissed at Naruto. "We'll get in serious trouble if Gatou catches us!"

Naruto was quick to shut his mouth then use both of his hands to cover it. His face was red from embarrassment and small beads of sweat were rolling down the sides of his face. He was probably scared that he might have blown our cover.
My heart was pounding, my body was trembling, and I was honestly grateful that Sasuke managed to, not only silence Naruto, but get him to stop moving. "Thanks, Sasuke."

Sasuke just nodded his head and stayed silent.

...

Sometime later, we eventually made it a small town and disembarked alongside a wooden walkway around a house. The boat trip threw off my sense of balance, so when I finally took my first step onto the walkway, I nearly fell. Thankfully, Sasuke helped me out and kept me from falling. I do not like boat trips…

The rower immediately went his separate ways, turning on the engine for a quick getaway. As for the rest of us, we still had a ways to go before we reached our destination point, which was Tazuna's house. We continued moving forward, eventually reaching a forest that made me reach into my weapon holster to take out a couple of kunai to arm myself.

I was not taking chances, it was still foggy and I'm sure a certain Kirigakure missing-nin would know how to use that to his advantage. Oh crap—we are so screwed in this current environment…

"K-Kakashi-sensei?" I turned to Kakashi, who looked at me questioningly. "Can you hold my glasses for me? The moisture from the fog is starting to build up from my glasses and I don't want to keep wiping them clean…"

"Sure, I'll keep them safe for you!" Kakashi smiled as he held out his hand.

I took off my glasses and then promptly placed them in the palm of Kakashi's hand. "Thank you…"

While my vision is shit, I could still make out blurry objects that were nearby. Back when he was still with us, Itachi made sure I knew how to walk around without wearing my glasses. He would usually take my glasses away and help me find ways to work around my hyperopia when it didn't involve my shurikenjutsu. Be it, I was still at a disadvantage, but not so that I was completely helpless when I was without my glasses. The reasons I even focus on the color of the shapes I make out when I'm not wearing my glasses are so I could keep track of them.

Naruto would be orange, Sasuke would be blue, Kakashi would be a mixture of dark colors with a light-colored top, and Tazuna…well, I'm not too sure about the colors, but I can recognize him with his hat—the shape of it, that is. Basically, the first thing that catches my attention for each and every person I come across becomes a rather important aspect I use to identify people when I can't see them well.

Despite this, I still have my limitations, which is why I refused to climb down that tree when my glasses fell off, like nope. And even though this foggy environment made it a bad time to be farsighted, I'd rather have blurry vision than no vision at all. I wasn't lying about the moisture.

Fortunately, the fog began to clear up after twenty minutes. Soon, the sun was shining, everything was bright, and I could actually see with my glasses on again.

Just knowing that the fog was gone took a huge load off of my shoulders. That was one less thing to worry about when Zabuza decided to ambush us. Again, I'm pretty sure shinobi from Kirigakure are quite familiar working around fog and mist. Though, the more I think about it, why didn't Zabuza take advantage of the fog?

At that moment, Naruto ran ahead of us and stopped to scout the area before throwing a shuriken into a cluster of trees. It was all too sudden and paired up with the fact that Naruto was being his...
loud, usual self…I was startled quite badly. I was also armed and if it weren't for Kakashi and his beautiful weapon-catching skills, Naruto would have gotten hurt.

Of course, Naruto didn't know this and tried to play it off cool. "Heh, just a rat…"

"Naruto, you idiot!" Sasuke walked over to Naruto and literally slapped him upside the head. "Chōko nearly hurt you for that!"

Poor Kakashi was visibly nervous for once, showing actual concern as he said, "Please, Naruto, don't use your shuriken. It's seriously dangerous…"

"Don't scare us like that, you brat!" Tazuna practically exploded at Naruto in anger.

"Please leave the throwing to me…" Even if Naruto's aim was shoddy, he could still hurt someone doing something like that…like himself, when he scared me!

Judging by Naruto's reaction, I think he just wanted some attention since he was the one who had his status as a shinobi questioned the most by Tazuna. Speaking of which, since our encounter with the Demon Brothers, Tazuna started taking me seriously. I mean, I did save Kakashi, but seriously, what the hell happened after I passed out?

"I think I see a shadow!" Dammit, Naruto, that is not how you catch people by surprise when you throw kunai!

The kunai Naruto threw flew into a couple of bushes to our left. There was an audible "thud!" a few seconds afterwards, notifying that Naruto's kunai had hit something…most likely a tree.

"I told you to stop, dumbass!" Sasuke bonked Naruto over the head. "Now you're just wasting kunai!"

Naruto's hands went to his head to tend the bump that was most likely forming after Sasuke had hit him. "But I really did sense something, dattebayo!"

And when Kakashi went into the bushes to check if Naruto was telling the truth, we found where Naruto's kunai went. It had embedded itself at the bottom of a tree's trunk, mere centimeters above a white rabbit's head. Any lower, and the kunai would have killed the rabbit instead of startling it. The poor thing had such a nasty shock, that it was foaming at the mouth. Its body was trembling and its ears were twitching.

I just couldn't believe this. "If you're still wondering how you could accidentally kill a rabbit…that's how."

Naruto was horrified and ran over to the rabbit's side. He picked up the rabbit and held it gently in his arms as he rubbed his cheek against the rabbit's furry cheek. "Sorry, I didn't mean it! Sorry, rabbit!"

"It's just a rabbit…" Tazuna remarked. "You killed one before."

"Yeah, for dinner…" Sasuke pointed out. "Naruto doesn't like killing animals for the most part."

"Neither do I, but when you're hungry, you're hungry." The Academy did a good job in getting its students to become efficient hunters. Of course, spending over a month in the deepest part of the forest surrounding Konoha can make a lot of young Academy students do many things when they're hungry and away from home.
"Hey, Kakashi, would it still be considered winter for a snow rabbit to keep its white fur?" Sasuke's question brought up a good point and fuck.

"Sensei..." I tried not to sound scared, but failed...horribly.

Kakashi didn't even bother to respond and instead, made a few shadow clones that were quick to push all of us onto the ground, barely avoiding the large, spinning projectile that had flew over us. The projectile's motion eventually came to an immediate stop after deeply embedding itself into the trunk of a tree. My heart started to race when I realized that it was the Kubikiribōchō that had been thrown at us.

_He's here._

Seconds after I had thought that, _he_ appeared. He had moved so fast, that all that could be seen of him was a blur. Then he came to a complete stop and was now standing on top of his sword's hilt. His back was to us, but his eyes were focused right on us.

Momochi Zabuza was as intimidating as I had imagined him to be. It was one thing looking at him from an observer's perspective, but actually being in his presence was just—oh _god_, I need to do something fast!

"Well, if it isn't Momochi Zabuza, a _missing-nin_ from Kirigakure." Kakashi had put emphasis on "_missing-nin_" for a very good reason and it was to give us a heads up.

I didn't waste any time pulling out a smoke bomb from my pocket and detonating it. I knew it wouldn't do much good against someone like Zabuza, but it would buy us some time. At least—that's what I thought until I realized that I only had cheap smoke bombs on me. The other smoke bombs are still stored in a sealing scroll that is in my backpack. I _knew_ I forgot to do something!

"Motherfucker!" I was hoping to get Tazuna out of the way, but I needed the other smoke bombs for that because Tazuna wasn't as fast as Naruto and Sasuke to escape before the smoke cleared. Knowing this, I told Sasuke and Naruto about it so they didn't leave Tazuna.

It was around that time that the smoke cleared and I just about near screamed when I found myself staring right at Zabuza, his sword now strapped onto his back. How the hell did he get past Kakashi—oh don't tell me he used my smoke bomb as an opening!

"Hello," Zabuza said before his hand came down and latched onto my braid. He was quite quick that I didn't have time to react.

"Aaah!" The back of my scalp started to burn from the pain that came from getting my hair pulled. It got worse after that and it took me a few seconds to register that I was no longer standing on the ground. I was dangling in mid-air.

I was in some serious pain right now and I only had my long hair to blame for it.

"Chōko!" And there go my friends, worrying about me.

"That's quite a lot of hair you have on yourself." What is it with _missing-nin_ always focusing their attention on me?! I'm just a magnet for trouble, now! "It certainly looks pretty...but pretty won't keep you alive."

You know, I have been contemplating for some time and I think now is a good time as ever to get rid of the fucking braid! Well—I would have, had Zabuza not cut my hair for me. He had used a kunai to just chop off my braid and I have no idea why he did it, but he just did. And since I was no longer...
connected to my braid anymore, gravity soon took effect and I was falling.

Kakashi had been quick to catch me before I landed onto the ground. He was pissed at Zabuza, who seemed rather content to stash the braid he finished cutting off of my being into his pocket. There goes nearly thirteen years of hair growth.

I'm honestly happy it's gone, but I still don't get why Zabuza, of all people, wanted my hair. Is there a black market out there for stuff like that?! Actually…that doesn't sound too far off, considering the stories I read, in my past life, about people selling their hair for money. Thinking more about it now, the only reason Zabuza is working for Gatou is for money, so it kind of makes sense as to why he wants my hair. Kind of, I still don't get why he's paying more attention to me than Kakashi of the motherfucking Sharingan.

Shortly after Kakashi had put me down, he pushed me behind himself, trying to make sure I was safe from Zabuza. "Why the sudden interest in a Genin?"

Zabuza just chuckled, earning a couple of kunai thrown in his direction from Kakashi. He was quick to dodge them and act as if he hadn't just been attacked. "I just wanted to meet the Genin who took down Gōzu and Meizu."

Oh shit, is that why he's paying attention to me? "Seriously?!"

Are you fricken' kidding me?! This is so not funny! In canon, Kakashi had been the one to take care of the Demon Brothers, to the point that Zabuza understood why the two were easily defeated. As that had not been the case here, where Kakashi has blatantly said that I had saved his life…the ending result was Zabuza showing interest in a Genin who managed to defeat to Chuunin instead of just Kakashi.

Fuck my life!

"So is this all about avenging them?" Kakashi was quite good at keeping his composure, even though his expression said otherwise. He still seemed pissed at the fact that Zabuza gave me a haircut.

Meanwhile with me, I was struggling to stay calm. As for Naruto and Sasuke, they were currently guarding Tazuna. The two appeared to be discussing something amongst each other, so I assumed they were coming up with a plan after my smoke bomb screw up. I hope they thought up something good, because I was currently out of ideas and why the fuck is Zabuza looking at me?!

"Imagine my reaction when I found out that little girl was the one who took down the Demon Brothers." I don't know whether I should be offended by that remark and what's with the mist? "To be honest, I don't really care about them. I just wanted to meet the kunoichi who defeated them."

Okay, I seriously don't like this attention I'm receiving.

"Don't worry, Chōko—I'll handle this," Kakashi said before lifting up his hitai-ate to uncover his left eye, which was a Sharingan.

Despite the years we spent with Kakashi, we never saw his Sharingan eye…until now, that is. To be honest, I'm quite surprised it took this long to see it. Of course, now I have everything to worry about because the fact that Kakashi is using his Sharingan means that Zabuza is dangerous enough to warrant its use.

So when Kakashi told me to run, I ran. I ran over to Tazuna, Sasuke, and Naruto, hoping they had a plan because my mind was blank. By now, the mist was growing thicker and more opaque. It still
wasn't enough to call it fog just yet, but it was close.

"Sorry about your hair…" Sasuke frowned.

"It'll grow back!" Though, I don't plan on letting get as long as it did, because I don't have the skill to handle having such long hair.

"It looks weird-ttebayo…" Naruto said before running his hand through my hair. "Heh, it's fluffy!"

*Slap!*

"Ow!" Naruto clutched his hand to his chest, seconds after I had slapped it away.

"Ask first before you touch!" Have you not learned from me over the years?

"S-Sorry…" Naruto frowned.

I shook my head and sighed. "It's fine!"

Well, it was until Zabuza used the Kirigakure no Jutsu, or the Hiding in the Mist Technique. Sasuke had made an outburst when Zabuza had disappeared from our sight completely. I was terrified when that came to my attention. Kakashi made it worse when he warned us about Zabuza's expertise in silent killings.

"You don't even notice until you're already dead." Kakashi, we get the point! "I can't use my Sharingan to its fullest potential. So don't let your guard down."

Damn it, Kakashi, stop giving me reasons to freak! "Sasuke…"

"Already on it…" Sasuke's eyes went from its usual onyx black to red.

I'm hoping that Sasuke's Sharingan might be able to get us somewhere. Like Kakashi, Sasuke only used his Sharingan when the situation called for it. For the most part, it's because Sasuke doesn't have much experience using it. Our only remaining Uchiha kinda left the day Sasuke activated his Sharingan…

"But if you fail, you're only going to die." Kakashi, please don't sound so nonchalant.

"You're really starting to piss me off, Scarecrow." Naruto scowled.

"The mist's getting thicker!" I think it's reached the point of being fog, because visibility is limited.

"Eight points," Zabuza's voice suddenly spoke. "The larynx, spine, lungs, liver, jugular vein, collarbone, kidneys, and heart…Which one should I go after?"

Yeah, I'm not keen on getting shanked today, thank you very much— "Ulp!"

Have I ever mentioned how much I hate the Killing Intent? Because I really do and—oh my god, it was potent. Tears were streaming down my eyes as my body trembled and my stomach churned. I'm pretty sure everyone else was doing just as bad as I was.

"Don't worry," Kakashi suddenly said to us. "I'll protect the three of you with my life. I won't let anyone on my team die."

The smile Kakashi gave us was so warm and reassuring. It was also genuine, because Kakashi meant what he said.
"I don't know about that." Zabuza was right behind me.

I reacted so quickly, I turned and swung my right foot into his side. I was using my full strength when I kicked and I was hoping to knock Zabuza aside. All I managed to do, instead, was get my entire leg wet as a wave of water splashed to the side. Water clones don't do so well against Akimichi clan strength, from the looks of it.

"Gross!" Now my bandages are wet! "I never knew water clones could be this nasty!"

"So you don't want to learn the technique?" Kakashi sounded a little disappointed when he popped up at our side.

"Sensei, watch out!" Naruto shrieked.

Zabuza had appeared behind Kakashi and swung his sword, slicing Kakashi in half. Instead of the usual blood and gore, Naruto, Sasuke, Tazuna, and I were splashed with water instead. Water clones…water clones everywhere.

"It's over!" Kakashi held a kunai to Zabuza's neck as he stood being the Kirigakure missing-nin.

Knowing what the current trend is, so far, that Zabuza is probably another water clone.

Splash!

Freaking water clones after water clones—oh shit, that's the real Kakashi! "Watch out!"

Kakashi managed to dodge in time to avoid Zabuza's sword as it was swung. Kakashi had dropped to the ground, only for Zabuza to plunge his sword into the ground and use it as leverage to deliver a side kick into Kakashi's side. It had been strong enough to send Kakashi into the pool of water that was nearby us.

Splash!

"Sensei!" Naruto called out.

"I'm sure he's okay…" It's just water—"fuck."

"He's from Kirigakure, dumbass!" Sasuke snapped at me. "Water is the last place he should be!"

"I know—I just remembered!" Gosh, don't chew off my head!

"Water Prison no Jutsu!" Fucking hell, now Kakashi's trapped and we're stuck with a missing-nin again!

Twice in a row should not be a thing, Kakashi!

"You may have been trying to escape to the water, but that was a big mistake." Zabuza chuckled darkly. "This is a special prison that you can't escape from. You give me a hard time when you're moving. Now then, Kakashi…I'm going to finish you off later."

Oh crap, he's looking at us right now.

"First, I'm going to get rid of them." Using only his left hand, Zabuza formed the tiger hand seal.

"Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu."

A water clone emerged from the pool of water, its gaze focused completely on us. It was unnerving,
especially since Kakashi was no longer capable of saving our asses. We were on our own...just like back then.

"The three of you have hitai-ate on as if you think you're ninja." Okay, Zabuza was just talking down to us now. "But ninja refers to someone who has gone through numerous life and death situations. In other words, you can call yourself a ninja when you appear in my bingo book. You three aren't ninja."

Well, excuse us for barely starting our shinobi career—shit, he's hiding in the mist again! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!

"Don't touch him!" Sasuke yelled loudly as he barely managed to catch Zabuza's right foot before it hit Naruto. "Chôko, do your thing!"

We are so unorganized right now, that I don't really even care! I pulled off my glasses, charged forward, and slammed my fist down onto the Zabuza clone's right knee. Even though it was only a water clone, the sickening crack that came from the action just disturbed me. The clone tried to fight back, but quickly found itself unable to, as, while Sasuke and I kept it busy, Naruto had taken the time to summon a numerous amount of shadow clones, of which apprehended the water clone.

It seemed too easy after that...and it was. I felt tears beginning to well up in the corners of my eyes after an overwhelming blow to my gut knocked me back a few steps. I managed to keep my footing, but not the contents of my stomach, which were emptied onto the ground.

"Gross..." I gagged.

That was painful...oh god, I don't feel good. And the tears—they just won't stop!

"Aaaaugh!" Sasuke!

Thud!

Sasuke landed back onto the ground, loudly yelling when the water clone's left foot stepped down onto his stomach. The water clone had resorted to using its sword as a makeshift crutch, of which it was able to use effectively to still get around. Even with one leg out of commission, it was still capable of fighting.

It had managed to knock each and every one of Naruto's clones, of which Naruto was quick to make more.

"Breaking the clone's knee was rather clever of you...but not clever enough." Zabuza's tone was condescending. "It'll take more than that to stop a water clone of myself."

"A little full of ourselves, aren't we?" I said before coughing afterwards. We needed a distraction to make an opening for ourselves, and I knew just the exact way to do so..."Naruto! Make a harem!"

It took Naruto a couple of seconds to understand what I was saying. This technique sure took its sweet time, but it finally made its appearance and goddamn, was it beautiful. So many naked pigtailed blondes acting provocatively around Zabuza's water clone. It was enough to catch everyone by surprise while I just took the moment to take out my remaining shuriken and kunai out of my holster. This was all I had left before I had to resort to taking out the sets of kunai and shuriken I had stored in a scroll inside my backpack. I needed to make it count before I had to replenish my holster.

I turned my attention to Zabuza, who was still in the midst of trying to comprehend what was going
Meanwhile, Kakashi just looked so done, even though he was probably running out of air in his container. Typical Kakashi…it's why we love him.

I inhaled deeply and then exhaled before readying the kunai and shuriken in my hands. I was going to take one for the team right now. If I fucked up, then I have Sasuke and Naruto to back me up. If there was one thing I taught Naruto, it was how to fully take advantage of the Oiroke no Jutsu. The art of deception does not only rely on innocent appearances…it can also very well lurk within seductive charms.

Any second now, one of the clones or the real Naruto was going to either slit the water clone’s throat with a kunai or gut him with one. In either case, it'll be enough to dispel the water clone for good.

As for me, I was ready for action. I charged forward, running as fast as I can toward Zabuza, who was only just registering that I was heading in his direction. It was at that moment that I threw my shuriken and kunai at him. Zabuza was still far enough away from me so that I could see him with clear vision. I would not miss…so the most Zabuza could do now was deflect the flying projectiles, which are too many for him to do quickly. Of course, that wasn't the only thing I was going to send at him.

"Suiton Teppōdama!" I spat out five balls of condensed water at Zabuza.

There were too many things heading toward Zabuza. It wasn't that much of a surprise that he released his hold on the technique keeping Kakashi trapped in order to avoid the barrage of kunai and shuriken head his way, as well as the balls of condensed water. Kakashi didn't waste any time getting out of the water after that, having learned his lesson the hard way when it came to water and Kirigakure shinobi.

"Thanks, Chōko," Kakashi said as he ruffled my hair. "Now go to the others!"

I did as I was told and returned to my friends and Tazuna. Naruto was in the midst of helping Sasuke off the ground, while Tazuna was nursing a bloody nose. I stared at Tazuna for a couple of seconds, before shaking my head. The Oiroke no Jutsu sure had its perks…maybe I should learn it…

"Hey, Naruto, you think you can teach me that technique of yours?” I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in turning my appearance into that of a sexy lady.

Of course, my question ended up making Naruto blush hard. "S-S-Sure!"

"Such a stupid move," Tazuna remarked.

Sasuke narrowed his eyes at Tazuna. "Says the guy with a bloody nose."

Tazuna coughed and said nothing.

Meanwhile with Kakashi and Zabuza, they were currently relying more on advance techniques, of which Kakashi was able to copy without any problems, thanks to the Sharingan. Speaking of the Sharingan, what's up with Sasuke…?

"I might have learned that from him…” Sasuke avoided my gaze after telling me that.

I blinked a few times and grinned widely before laughing out loud. "Heehee, are you serious?"

"Shut up!" Sasuke snapped. "It's not funny!"

"Oh, I'll have you know that it is!" I bet Sasuke was trying to learn the Kage Bunshin no Jutsu and
picked up the wrong technique.

When a large wave of water blasted right past us, I should have known karma was going to be a bitch. While Sasuke, Naruto, Tazuna were able to brace themselves, I had been too busy poking fun at Sasuke and well...I ended up losing my balance and getting dragged into the current of the water. I got knocked around for a couple of seconds before Kakashi decided to help me out.

I was coughing up water when Kakashi set me down on the branch of the tree that Zabuza had finished crashing into at full force.

"You're going to die now." Kakashi's tone was dark as he pulled out what I believe was a kunai.

I took out my glasses and put them on. Sure enough, Kakashi was holding a kunai.

Oh god, I didn't want to watch this grisly death. Too bad for me, I ended up witnessing the sight of two senbon skewering themselves into Zabuza's neck. My hands immediately went to my neck, almost as if that had been my neck those senbon had punctured.

Within seconds, Zabuza's body collapsed onto the ground.

"Hehe, you're right. He's dead." A masked figure in a nearby tree caught all of our attention.

It took me a couple of seconds to realize that it was Haku and that I had completely forgotten all about him. I still want to burn the image of Zabuza getting his neck punctured out of my memory and uuugh, the image is going to haunt me for life!

"Yeah, he's dead." Kakashi had even checked Zabuza's pulse himself to confirm it.

"Thank you very much." Haku bowed. "I was looking for a chance to kill Zabuza."

"That mask...you must be a hunter-nin from Kirigakure," Kakashi remarked.

Haku lifted his head and looked at Kakashi. "You are very well informed."

"Though...why senbon?" I suddenly asked out loud. "They have little killing power, unless one has the proper medical knowledge."

I know this because that's what Shisui taught me.

"It makes the job less messy to clean up." The response was quite calm, if a bit quick. Haku didn't waste any time after that to fetch Zabuza after that. He said his farewells before vanishing from out sight.

It was only until after they had left that I had realized my mistake in pointing out the little killing power senbon had. I had basically blown Haku's cover and I'm pretty sure Kakashi had caught on, but Haku had left before anyone else could ask a question.

Then Kakashi collapsed, so now we had to deal with an out of commission Jounin-sensei until he recovered. Well, it was a good thing Sasuke had some minor medic-nin training, or else we'd be screwed.

Chapter End Notes
So Sainganin.San drew another cute picture of Chōko. I suggest everyone take the moment to check it out! The Pakkun scene in this chapter was meant to be a tribute to it!

By the by, Chōko has lost the long hair. It had gotten so long, that it was only a matter of time until it got cut. One thing that Chōko hasn't noticed is that her ribbon is missing.

Oh, and there are some things that have been kept from Chōko, in regards to Gōzu and Meizu, the Demon Brothers. She took them down, yes, but there really is more to it and because of that, it was the reason Zabuza took an interest in Chōko. Keep in mind that Chōko took down two Chuunin who were older than she is by at least ten years.

Also, there seems to be a running gag of some sort, in the form of Chōko becoming a target of interest in regards to missing-nin. At this point, she might as well be a magnet for them.

AND YES, Sasuke accidentally learned the Oiroke no Jutsu. He had been aiming for the Kage Bunshin no Jutsu, but got the wrong one. Oh, and the Harem no Jutsu made its first appearance!

Speaking of harems, one thing I noticed about the Naruto fandom is everyone's love for NarutoxHarem. I'm honestly waiting for the day I get to see a fem!Naruto with a REVERSE harem, meaning NO GIRLS...just men. I want to see a reverse harem that does NOT end with fem!Naruto picking only ONE guy (like most reverse harems do in the end). It's honestly something I've been wanting to see, but I doubt I'll ever see it happen.

Sorry if I haven't replied much, I've been busy with the final weeks of classes and yeah...it's finals week next week and just...UGH.

I got a website to finish, a movie to edit, and a final exam to study for—college is hard! DX

It was like four in the morning when I finished writing this chapter, but I just wanted to get this chapter out for you guys, so I hope you enjoy it! Please don't hesitate to point out any mistakes I made, so until next time, everyone!
Tazuna's daughter, Tsunami, was a lovely lady who was quite quick to point us to the guest room, where we set Kakashi down on a futon. The guy was completely out cold and Naruto was extremely tempted to pull down his mask, but didn't. Naruto wanted to find out in some different way that didn't involve him taking advantage of Kakashi's current unconscious state.

"That's very mature of you." If I didn't have a conscience, my curiosity would have immediately won out and made me pull down Kakashi's mask.

"Heehee, I guess I am-ttebayo!" Naruto grinned widely as he rubbed the back of his head.

Sasuke snorted as he continued to look over Kakashi, making sure everything was completely okay.

"So what's the diagnosis, Sasuke?" I hope it isn't anything too serious.

"Nothing too bad, but I don't think he'll be able to move for a week." Sasuke sighed. "It's best he just gets some rest."

"Ahh, that's good to hear!" Naruto laughed.

"I trust everything is okay?" Tsunami had come back to check on us.

"We're fine," Sasuke insisted. "Though, do you have a mirror and a pair of scissors?"

Tsunami blinked a few times, her attention immediately shifting over to me, most likely having noticed my recent haircut. "Give me some time and I'll see what I can find."

Tsunami left the room after saying that, leaving Naruto, Sasuke, and I alone with an unconscious Kakashi. A minute passed before Sasuke turned to me.

"Now that Kakashi is out of the way," he began, "Chōko, lift up your shirt."

Did I hear that right? "Excuse me?"

"You got hit pretty badly in the gut by that water clone!" Sasuke explained. "Now lift up your shirt so I can see if there is any visible damage!"

I stared blankly at Sasuke before lifting up my shirt to show Sasuke my stomach. There was a really nasty bruise where Zabuza's water clone had punched me. So that's why my stomach's been feeling a little tender... "For a minute, I was almost worried I lost you to puberty."

"Tch, as if I could ever see you in that way." Sasuke's hands glowed green as they hovered over my stomach. "You're not my type."

"Back at you." I might as well get that out of the way since Sasuke was the one to bring it up.

"Hey, hey... am I your type?" Naruto earned my bundled up scarf in his face for asking that question. "I was joking, dattebayo!"

"Joke sometime later when I'm not showing off my stomach to you guys—wow, your hands
"are cold!" I think I have goosebumps…

"Sorry!" Sasuke apologized. "Cold hands aside, you don't seem to be hurt too seriously."

That's good to hear… "Can I put my shirt down now?"

"Let me just heal your bruise first…can you lay down for me?" Sasuke asked. "It'd make my job a little easier."

"Sure…" Not like I have anything better to do with this bruise on my stomach—oh crap, I just felt it now! Oww…how did I not feel it like that before?

So as I lay back on the floor, my gaze currently focused on the ceiling as Sasuke healed the bruise on my stomach, I couldn't help but wonder how the hell did we managed to make it back alive after our encounter with Zabuza. It was at that moment a certain someone decided to wake up and ask a question.

"Is there something I'm interrupting?" Kakashi had woken up, his head turned to look at us with his right eye, his left eye currently covered by his hitai-ate. "Do I need to give you guys the talk?"

Oh hell no—once was enough! "No! What's wrong with you?!"

Kakashi just laughed, making it very obvious that he was deliberately messing with us. Typical of Kakashi to do immediately after regaining consciousness—it's not like he has anything better to do.

"I'm just healing her stomach!" Sasuke snapped. "Go back to sleep, Kakashi—you need to rest!"

Naruto nodded his head. "Yeah, listen to Sasuke-ttebayo!"

"You know, Tou-chan's gonna want to know why my hair is like this." Who's laughing now?!

"Oh, sorry about that…" Okay, now I feel like a bitch for making Kakashi feel bad… "Are you okay with it?"

"To be honest, I've been meaning to cut it after I got my braid stuck on that branch." I do not want to experience a repeat of that… "I just wasn't expecting that guy to cut it off like that…you almost done, Sasuke?"

"Just a little more and…done." Sasuke removed his hands off my stomach almost at once. "It isn't much, but it should take less time for it to completely heal."

I sat up and looked at my stomach. Sure enough, it was as Sasuke had said. The bruise had healed considerably enough for its dark coloring to lighten up a bit. The pain sure wasn't as bad as it had been before. "Thank you…"

"You're welcome." Sasuke nodded his head before turning to Naruto. "Now it's your turn, knucklehead."

"I'm fine-ttebayo!" Naruto insisted. "Worry more about yourself!"

"Yeah, you did get hurt, unlike Naruto…" Zabuza's water clone stepped on Sasuke's stomach. I'm worried if that did anything serious. "In fact, you kept Zabuza from hitting Naruto."

"Thank you for that-ttebayo!" Naruto grinned widely at Sasuke. "I owe you one!"

"No problem." Sasuke smiled at Naruto. "I guess I should worry about myself…"
"Anyways!" I decided to change the subject. "What's up with you, Kakashi-sensei? You look troubled."

"It's about what you said before that hunter-nin left with Zabuza." Ahh, so Kakashi's going to tell us that Zabuza is not dead!

"What about him?" Looks like Tazuna decided to join us. "You guys did a good job of defeating a strong ninja. We should be safe for a while."

"That's the problem," Kakashi said as he sat up in his futon. "Bodies are usually disposed of on site, and yet, what did the hunter-nin we saw do with the body?"

"He took the body with him!" Naruto exclaimed.

"Exactly." Kakashi sighed. "And Chōko made an excellent point about the hunter-nin's use of senbon."

"No way…" Sasuke looked as if he had seen a ghost. "You don't mean…"

"Shisui said that senbon have little killing power!" I'm never forgetting that tidbit Shisui told me on the day Mikoto chased his ass around the Uchiha compound before giving him a lecture about taking her senbon without her permission. "You need to have proper medical knowledge in order to get around senbon's minimal killing power since what they lack in power, they make up in accuracy."

"Just what are you guys talking about?" Tazuna was starting to appear nervous.

"What we're saying is that Zabuza is most likely alive," Kakashi explained. "Hunter-nin possess thorough knowledge of the body's structure. It's very likely that one could use that knowledge to kill a missing-nin with senbon. At the same time, they could also use it to put a person in a state of momentary death."

"Which is what that hunter-nin most likely did to Zabuza…" Sasuke remarked. "It's a possibility we can't ignore."

Naruto nodded his head. "Yeah, did you see how fast that guy left when Chōko-chan said what Shisui-nii told her about senbon?"

"Well, what are you going to do?" A small bead of sweat rolled down the side of Tazuna's face.

Kakashi turned his attention to us, his Genin. "I'm going to train these three."

"You're not going to leave me in a tree after getting me stuck there, are you?" Please don't… "Ah!"

Kakashi brought his hand down on my head to ruffle my hair. "Now why would I do that to my little cute Genin?"

"Hmmmm…" Don't try to play innocent, ya sadist! "Can we at least wait until I fix my hair?"

"And before that—get at least a couple hours of sleep!" Sasuke looked sternly at Kakashi. "Don't make me knock you out."

"Maa maa, I'll rest up!" Kakashi held up his hands in front of himself. "We'll start tomorrow, then… Though, let me say that you three have really improved a lot. I'm quite proud of you."

Naruto laughed as a small blush tinged his cheeks. "Heehee, thanks, sensei!"
"I got a mirror and scissors!" Tsunami probably picked the best of times to walk into the room. She walked over to me and handed me a mirror and a pair of scissors.

The first thing I did was look at myself in the mirror. Holy shit, my hair…it looks so weird seeing the braid gone. It's certainly fluffed up quite a lot, in the back, due to its current short length. Not to mention, the haircut Zabuza gave me was completely uneven. Uuurgh, it's going to take me months to even out my hair!

"Do you need any help?" Tsunami asked me.

"I'm fine!" I can handle this! I hope…

"Things are sure going to get interesting, dattebayo!" Naruto sure seems excited, while I'm just relieved everything turned out okay.

"No, it's not," an unexpected guest decided to join us in the form of a little boy with spiky black hair and dark eyes.

"Who the hell are you?!" Naruto was not one to hold his tongue when it came to little kids.

Of course, the little kid didn't seem too bothered with Naruto's reaction. Instead, he seemed more focused on Tazuna, who smiled widely at the little boy.

"Inari!" Tazuna exclaimed as he held out his arms. "Where were you?"

"I'm home, Jii-chan!" Inari dashed over to his grandfather and wrapped his arms around him in an embrace. A few moments passed before Inari focused his dark eyes on us. "Who are they?"

"Inari, say hello to the ninja that escorted your grandfather," Tsunami was calm, but with a stern tone.

"It's okay." Tazuna seemed happy to be reunited with his grandson. "Right, Inari?"

Inari continued staring at us for a minute before turning to Tsunami and saying, "Okaa-chan, they're going to die. There's no way a person can win by going against Gatou."

"Wow, way to be a pessimist." Sheesh, I don't need to hear a little kid say that—I said that out loud, didn't I? "Oops…I didn't mean to say that—sorry!"

"No, don't apologize-ttebayo!" Naruto exclaimed. "This brat needs to know what's up! Listen up! I'm going to be Hokage one day and for that to happen, that means I'm not allowed to give up, dattebayo!"

Sasuke nodded his head. "We've worked hard to get as far as we've gotten."

"We have had enough brushes with death to not go down so easily…” Me, especially…I died once because irony decided to make me its bitch when I walked down those stairs. I nearly died again thanks to Orochimaru deciding to throw a curve ball in what could be considered the point of normalization in which Itachi left the village. I'm not even going to mention how risky it was to even befriend Gaara before he gained a sense of stability. The fact is I've had enough experiences for me to have a stubborn hold on my life.

I plan on staying alive for a very long time and it'd be a very cold day in hell before I allow myself to die. Ahaha, I already know how difficult that's going to be in this world, but as I said before, I'm not going to go down so easily without a fight.
"Pfft, what are you—a hero?" Inari sounded rather cynical for a little kid—a civilian, at that. "If you don't want to die, then go. Leave and go home."

Inari turned and made his way over to the door.

"Where are you going, Inari?" Tazuna asked.

Inari slid open the door before looking back at his grandfather. "To look at the ocean from my room…"

Inari left the room after that and closed the door behind him, leaving a rather miffed Naruto and somewhat irritated Sasuke.

…

"Sorry," Tazuna apologized for his grandson. "The passing year's been very difficult on everyone in Wave."

"Tch, no kidding…" It takes a lot to make a little kid like Inari *that* cynical. And knowing the events that happened in canon, we have Gatou to blame for all of that. Seriously, that man needs to die and Naruto looks about ready to explode. "Naruto, don't do anything you might regret—"

"That little shit needs to learn a lesson, dattebayo!" Naruto ran out of the room after Inari, most likely to give the kid a piece of his mind.

I turned to Sasuke after that, the two of us staring at each other for a moment before sighing in exasperation. Sometimes, Naruto was a bit too much to handle.

"So…how good are you at tree walking?" Kakashi suddenly asked.

I made a face at Kakashi. "Really, you're going to ask me *that* question?"

You are asking this to the girl you keep making climb trees to fetch your kunai. The very same girl who keeps getting stuck in said trees, and is then left there for a good amount of time before being brought down—all for the sake of phasing her out of a fear of falling.

"I need an idea, since I'm quite aware Naruto has little to no skill in his tree-walking ability and I need to know how you two are, overall, for tomorrow's training session." Kakashi got straight to the point when he wanted to. "I'm moving Naruto onto the next level of chakra control training and I need someone to be there as his partner."

"Not it!" I was quick to say.

Sasuke looked about ready to jump me for that. "You know he's going to make a competition out of this between the two of us."

"Yeah…it'll motivate him better that way." Get it in your head, Sasuke! "That's how it works with you or are you still trying to forget that you learned the Oiroke no Jutsu from Naruto by sheer accident?"

Sasuke's face lit up with a luminescent blush when I mentioned that technique. "Sh-Shut up…"

"Tsun-tsun!" I laughed. "Not so funny when I use it against you, huh?"

"I said shut up!" Sasuke said before tackling me onto the floor.
"Whoa, whoa, whoa, I'm holding scissors, you idiot!" Holy crap, Sasuke!

**THUD!**

"Okay, oww..." Dude—you just landed on my stomach, you ass! "You are...so lucky...you didn't land on the scissors!"

"Or break the mirror," Kakashi added. "Hey, you two, behave—don't make get out Pakkun! I'll make sure he bites, too."

That was certainly enough for Sasuke and I to behave. Sasuke got off me and I was allowed a moment to tend to my currently throbbing stomach. Oww...right on my bruise, ya jerk.

"You just finished healing that..." I said as I gently rubbed my stomach.

"S-Sorry...let me heal that for you again." Sasuke looked guilty as he held out his hand. "And let me help you with your hair—please?"

Dammit, I'm a sucker when Sasuke looks at me with those eyes... He's like a puppy, sometimes.

...

When Naruto came back to us a few minutes later, he was looking rather somber. Probably because Naruto just saw Inari crying over his dead father. Then Naruto noticed Sasuke was fixing my hair, having finished completely healing the bruise on my stomach. Kakashi had taken to watching the scene before him, even though he should be sleeping. Tsunami had taken her leave to start fixing lunch, while Tazuna had left to his room to rest up.

Naruto didn't really say much and just sat down next to Sasuke and I. After ten minutes had passed, Sasuke ruffled my hair and placed the scissors down onto the floor. He held out the mirror in front of me and asked, "What do you think?"

When I looked into the mirror, I couldn't believe what I had seen. I stared at my image in the mirror before turning to my teammates and Jounin-sensei, and then back at the mirror. I ran my hand through my hair, feeling the fluffiness of the back of my hair.

I always had a vague idea that my hair appeared the way it did due to its long length. And really, it did. Without its long length to weigh it down, my hair's true nature revealed itself. I had spiky hair... and right now, the way it spiked up in the back, it reminded me a lot of Sasuke's hair, except fluffier.

"Maa, it looks like a baby bird!" Kakashi chuckled.

I made a face at Kakashi, owner of spiky silver hair. I blinked a few times before turning to Sasuke, owner of black hair that was spiky in the back, and then Naruto, owner of spiky blond hair. Spiky hair...holy shit, with my recent haircut, this entire team possesses spiky hair.

"We're all alike, dattebayo!" Naruto seemed to have noticed.

"Team Spiky Hair," I found myself saying as I made Sasuke lower the mirror. "Unbelievable..."

"I think it looks cute on you..." Sasuke remarked.

"I thought you liked long hair..." Or did something happen over the years?

"I do, but short hair is cute, too." Sasuke, you are a serious danger to me in regards to throwing me under the bus to your fangirls.
"How am I going to explain this hair to my parents and everyone else?" Seriously, nearly thirteen years of hair growth gone out the window due to a missing-nin taking interest in me.

"You did say you've been meaning to cut it, Chōko," Kakashi pointed out. "So there's that."

"And Sasuke did help in fixing it-ttebayo!" Naruto added.

I stared at my teammates and Jounin-sensei before sighing and shaking my head. "You guys are too much, sometimes…"

"But you still love us, right?" Naruto said before latching onto me in a tight hug. "Right?"

"Right…” These dorks are who I live for. "Now get off me, I need to clean up the hair on the floor. I don't think Tsunami-san will be happy to see this mess on her floor."

…

I grew attached to my hair by the next day, not really minding its spikiness, due to how fluffy it felt. It also helped that, with that braid out of the way, I could finally feel the air on the back of my neck. It was a very nice feeling.

Shortly after we had woken up, Kakashi, using a couple of crutches as supports, took all of us out into the middle of the forest to begin training. I was used as an example of sorts to climb a tree, though I think Kakashi was purposely trying to get me stuck as an incentive for Sasuke and Naruto to get me out of the tree. Sasuke's tree walking skills were not that bad, but definitely not good enough. It wasn't enough to get him far up a tree, as it did with me.

In terms of how I even started tree walking, I got a good start into it on my own out of sheer curiosity. Babysitting the Takemi triplets is what helped me perfect my tree walking skills, as Kakashi gave me a couple of tips when I had to get Kiku off the ceiling. It was a similar situation to tree walking, just on a different surface. Once I did move on to actual trees, everything got easier, it was just my fear of falling that was hindering my progress.

"The faster you master tree walking, the quicker we'll move onto water walking!" Kakashi shouted at Naruto and Sasuke, who were making good progress with tree climbing.

I was at Kakashi's side, currently sharpening my kunai. I had already taken out the extra sets of kunai and shuriken out of my sealing scroll and filled my empty holster with them. Right now, I was just making sure they were extra sharp. I like it when my kunai are extra sharp—it makes it easier to embed themselves deeper into a target and—oh crap, that was fucking morbid.

"Sensei?" I turned to Kakashi. "Should I worry about having morbid thoughts in regards to sharp kunai?"

"No, it's just a sign you're becoming a better kunoichi," Kakashi explained. "There's nothing wrong with prioritizing sharpness—even if the reasons are morbid as they could very well save your life."

Kakashi certainly has a point, as disturbing as it was… "Hey, hey…just what did happen after I passed out back then? Why was Zabuza so interested in me?"

Kakashi stayed silent for a moment before saying, "I'll tell you later when you're ready. For now, just focus on sharpening your kunai. If you're up to it, would you mind doing the same for my kunai?"
Well, I got nothing better to do until Sasuke and Naruto improve their tree climbing skills, so I guess I'll be good sharpening more kunai. "Sure…only if you tell me more about Zabuza."

"Maa, you're too curious for your own good." Despite what he said, Kakashi honestly seemed amused. "Let me start off by explaining how some things work in Kirigakure…"

And so I was informed about Bloody Mist and the rather brutal practice its Academy had where students would kill each other in order to graduate. It was thanks to Zabuza that the practice was discontinued after he massacred an entire graduating class of students. The only reason this practice even came to be about was due to the Fourth Mizukage, Yagura, who, if my memory serves well, was a jinchuuriki and current container of the Sanbi, Isobu.

Thinking more about Yagura, isn't he currently being controlled by Tobi? Ehh, I'm just gonna push that aside as it really isn't something I can fix. I am in no position to fix something like that and even if I could, it's a bit of a death wish because fucking Tobi. Oh man, Kakashi doesn't need to know about him yet, uuuugh, that's gonna be a huge punch to the stomach years from now.

"So that's who Zabuza is…" I'm still not comfortable with the fact that he's interested in me…at all.

"As long as you stay by my side, I can guarantee your safety from him." Kakashi smiled at me, his right eye curved upwards.

"Is that why I'm still here?" And not guarding Tazuna, as Sakura would have done in canon? "If so, then who's going to guard Tazuna?"

"I've been contemplating on using Naruto's shadow clones, since he's capable of producing so much," Kakashi mused.

"Hey, aren't they capable of speeding up learning processes?" It's been a while since I've dabbled into this. "Like, when they disperse, any information or experience is passed onto the original?"

"Right you are…" Kakashi paused for a moment. "I ought to tell him about it."

"You probably should." It could definitely speed up the chakra control exercises and help Naruto gain better chakra control at a faster pace.

Sasuke, on the other hand…the fact that he was able to learn medical ninjutsu gave sign of his advanced chakra control. He just needed more practice with it in other areas, which is where the tree climbing comes into play.

…

As a result of Kakashi informing Naruto about how shadow clones work, Naruto was able to immensely improve his tree climbing, thus, in term, improving his chakra control by the late evening. Naruto still needed some more practice, but otherwise, he was doing rather well.

Sasuke had mastered tree climbing, but stayed with Naruto as means of providing incentive and competition to Naruto.

Both Naruto and Sasuke were rather exhausted, the two of them leaning on each other as we made our way back to Tazuna's house. Times like these, I wish I had a camera on me, but I'm pretty sure Naruto left Shisui's camera at home. This would have been a perfect picture to add to the album…

FLASH!
Kakashi? "Where did you get…is that Shisui's?"

"I brought it along—just in case," Kakashi said before storing the camera in a sealing scroll. "Oh, and when we return to Konoha, we are definitely taking another group photo—to accommodate to your new haircut."

"Gee, thanks," I said dryly.

Dinner was much livelier than yesterday, in the sense that we actually ate dinner. We pretty much slept for the rest of the day after cleaning up the mess on the floor. Our encounter with Zabuza left us rather exhausted and once the adrenaline wore off, we just conked out. We were out like a light, curled up on the floor around our favorite sensei. We woke up like that, by the way. The only difference was that Tsunami and Tazuna had covered us with a blanket, so that we weren't cold.

So dinner…food was good, and it definitely was better than the ration bars we had been eating all day. Don't get me wrong—it isn't as if my family's ration bars are bad (far from it), but it just feels good to actually eat real food. It also helps that Tsunami is a good cook.

Tazuna was certainly enjoying dinner, especially since it had been a while since he last ate with so many people. And Inari was being a brooding little boy, saying nothing and just focusing on his food. Every few moments or so, Inari would glance at Kakashi, Naruto, Sasuke, and I. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but stayed quiet.

After dinner, we stuck around to drink tea. Naruto had passed out on table midway through his cup of tea and Sasuke was struggling to stay awake as he finished his tea. Kakashi was resisting the urge to poke Sasuke on the head as he kept drifting off, since the two sat next to each other. And I was just resting my head on the table, my eyes focused on a picture hanging from the wall. It was a picture of four people, three of them being Tsunami, Tazuna, and Inari. They all looked so happy, Inari, especially. The fourth person might have also been just as happy, but it was hard to say, since they were torn out of the picture.

I noticed that Inari was looking at it and, like a dumbass, I ended up asking a question about the picture, which ended up being a touchy subject with Inari. Inari left the room shortly afterwards, with his mother following him out, leaving the rest of us with Tazuna.

By now, Sasuke was wide-awake, but Naruto was still out cold, despite how loud Inari had been when he closed the door behind him and when Tsunami scolded her father. It was at that point that Tazuna started explaining to us how Inari had changed, as a result of an incident that happened to his father.

"Before I can tell you about the incident, I must first tell you about the man who was known as the hero of this island," Tazuna began.

"H-Hero?" Naruto mumbled as he finally regained consciousness. He yawned loudly before rubbing his eyes. "What's this about a hero-ttebayo?"

"Tazuna-san was just about to tell us a story, Naruto," Kakashi explained.

"Oh, okay…sorry if I interrupted you, dattebayo." Naruto yawned again, but stayed quiet after that.

It was from there that Tazuna told us of Kaiza, a fisherman who had come to this island, seeking his dream. He was also Inari's father figure and the hero of Wave. Inari had met Kaiza three years ago, when Kaiza had saved him from drowning. Since then, the two had become inseparable to the point
that Kaiza eventually became part of Inari's family, having married Tsunami and becoming Inari's stepfather. Kaiza later became known as a hero after he had saved the village when the dam door opened up during a storm.

Naruto had seemed to enjoy this story, but it was probably because of the way he could relate to Inari. Inari and Kaiza weren't related by blood, but they were as close as father and son. Much like how Naruto was with Shisui and Sasuke.

Of course, all good things have to come to an end and for that, Gatou can be blamed. It was thanks to Gatou that Kaiza was publicly executed in front of his people. That happened right after Kaiza had his arms cut off, which was probably done purposely to render Kaiza's words useless. After all, how was Kaiza able to protect what was important to him without his arms?

"If something is truly important to you—even it's heart-breaking, even if it's sorrowful—you keep on trying and trying, even if you lose your life, you keep on protecting it with these two arms!"

It was certainly enough to break Inari's spirit and make him call his own father a liar. Gatou really needs to pay for what he's done. A kid like Inari doesn't deserve such a childhood—especially since he's a civilian. It just goes to show that being a civilian isn't as easy as it seems.

Naruto seemed ready to make a difference and leapt out of his chair, only to fall flat on his face.

"Thud!"

"Naruto, you need to rest up!" Sasuke exclaimed.

"If you're trying to train, don't," Kakashi said. "You used too much chakra. Any more and you'll die."

"C'mon, Naruto, it's better if you try when you're fully energize." I really don't want Naruto to hurt himself. "There's no point in exhausting yourself over an exercise to improve your chakra control if you can't even use what you learned to fight better."

"But I want to prove…that heroes do exist—ttebayo!" Naruto forced himself to stand.

Even though he was wobbling, Naruto still continued to stand. Sasuke stared at Naruto, somewhat annoyed with the fact that Naruto was being rather stubborn. Kakashi just sighed while I face palmed. There really was no point in changing Naruto's mind.

"Sleep first," Sasuke insisted. "We'll wake up early in the morning so we can continue to train."

Naruto made a face, but nodded his head. "Fine…"

"I guess that means we should go to sleep, then," Kakashi said as he grabbed his crutches and stood up. "It's time for bed, everyone!"

Seconds after saying that, Naruto passed out onto the floor. Sasuke and I turned to look at each other, sighing afterwards in slight exasperation.

Only Naruto would do something like this.

Chapter End Notes
So it's finals week, I'm pretty exhausted from filming, I still got a video to edit and a website to finish, as well as an exam to study for, but look! An update and I sure don't regret it! Yeah… I'm seriously exhausted, ahahah…

Of course, I always am, during finals week. So anyways, I don't think I ever mentioned that Chōko's actual hair type was spiky, because it actually is. It's just that it was so long, that it never really appeared that way until now, due to how short it is. It's the same way curly hair works, the longer it is, the more weighed down the curls are.

This is based on my experience with my hair, so using that, I applied it to Chōko's naturally spiky hair. So the longer it gets, the more weighed down the spikes are, and the shorter it is, the more her hair puffs up as its true nature shows itself. Though, to be fair, now that her hair has gotten such an uneven cut, the spikes are here to stay. And so Team Spiky Hair is now a thing.

It's funny how Chōko used to be the only one in her team with somewhat normal hair (somewhat, in the sense that it was hella long) and now she's like everyone else.

Oh, and to explain a thing in regards to Chōko's hair, she basically has the same hair type as Chōji, who happens to have spiky hair as well. And, once again, Chōko has yet to notice she's missing her ribbon. Give her until someone else mentions it before she notices and expect her to freak when that happens.

And little by little, Gōzu and Meizu's fates are being unraveled. The hints are there and I really won't say much about it until the next chapter, which, by the way, is gonna be a POV shift. I won't say whom, but considering the current arc we are at, it'll be a fitting character choice.

Oh, and one thing that has yet to be mentioned is that, you know how Sasuke accidentally learned the Oiroke no Jutsu, thanks to his Sharingan? Well, he isn't the only one who learned it by accident. Make what you will with that.

Try not to look too deeply into the scene where Naruto jokes around by asking Chōko if he's her type. Really, he's just messing around. The scene was mostly played for laughs, as shown by Kakashi and his trolling.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! I'm hoping to bring an end to the Wave arc by the next chapter, with the POV shift, so here's to seeing how that turns out! Until next time, everyone!
When Naruto woke up the next morning, it was still dark outside. He almost went back to sleep, had he not remembered last night's events.

"That's right..." Naruto nodded his head and carefully got out of his futon. He turned to his teammates, who were still asleep. It was going to be difficult getting past Kakashi, who was quite the light sleeper when he wanted to be. And yet, despite knowing this, Naruto still tried.

And when Naruto made it out of the house without once getting detected, he found himself grinning rather widely. It was as if he had accomplished something worth being considered a challenge. Too bad he wasn't going to be able to tell anyone until they found him. It was but a small price to pay for being able to continue training.

Suppressing a yawn, Naruto reached into his pocket and pulled out a ration bar. He unwrapped the bar and started eating it as he made his way toward the forest, where he and Sasuke had been training the other day. He was somewhat annoyed that Sasuke had been able to master tree climbing before he did. Yhen again, Sasuke also knew medical ninjutsu, so it made sense that Sasuke had better chakra control.

It still didn't make it any less annoying, but Naruto could manage. He would at least make sure that he would master tree climbing as well before the day ended, so Kakashi could move him and everyone else to water walking. Naruto had an idea of what that was. In fact, he had seen Natsu walk on water when he and everyone else were helping Hanabi learn how to swim.

He had also seen Zabuza, as well as Kakashi, standing on the water. Naruto felt himself make a face at the mere thought of Zabuza. He didn't like the missing-nin...at all. He especially didn't like how Zabuza had just cut off Chōko's braid and paid close attention to her. And it was all because Chōko had saved Kakashi from Gōzu and Meizu. Of course, Naruto knew that Kakashi could have gotten himself out of those chains when the Demon Brothers had ambushed them. All it took was a simple substitution, and yet, Kakashi did nothing. He didn't have to, because Chōko's sleep deprivation, paranoia, and impulsivity had finally taken its toll on her when she reacted the way she did.

It had happened so fast. All Naruto could remember was the flurry of shuriken and kunai that flew from Chōko's hands before he saw the bodies hit the floor. Naruto was honestly amazed at how Chōko had not managed to hit Kakashi, only to then realize that Kakashi had her glasses with him.

Before the ambush, Kakashi had taken Chōko's glasses. Naruto had thought Kakashi was just messing with Chōko, but after the attack, he knew that it had been done on purpose. Chōko wasn't in the best state for someone who was armed and ready to attack anything that set her off. So when Kakashi had noticed a rather suspicious puddle of water on the ground before Chōko did, he removed her glasses and set up a simple genjutsu to conceal the puddle from their sights.

They never saw it coming...well, Kakashi did, but he acted as though he hadn't. And for that, he and everyone else found out firsthand what a sleep-deprived Chōko was capable of when stressed and shoved into a life or death situation.
It was honestly frightening.

When Chōko had finally stopped throwing, she was panting heavily with tears streaming down her cheeks, trying her hardest to make out what had just happened. She had seemed so exhausted and terrified. It wasn't that much of a surprise that she passed out.

Kakashi had been the one to catch Chōko as she fell. He had also been the one to advise everyone to keep quiet on what truly happened, for fear of Chōko's reaction. After all, Kakashi have never expected there to be any casualties. Naruto felt his heart nearly stop when he heard Kakashi admit that.

So when Zabuza brought up Gōzu and Meizu, Naruto was worried that Chōko was going to find out through him. Naruto still didn't understand how Zabuza even found out about the attack and that alone terrified him even more, because just how long had Zabuza been keeping tabs on them?

Even now, Naruto worried that the missing-nin was watching over him and his friends, even though Kakashi blatantly mentioned that anyone put in a state of momentary death needed time to recover.

"Is this how Chōko-chan must've felt?" Naruto frowned.

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Naruto scowled and stuffed the rest of the ration bar into his mouth. He chewed a few times before swallowing hard and then ran. He kept running until he came across the tree where he had left his marks of progress on. He stared at the tree before him for a few seconds before concentrating on focusing a fixed amount of chakra to the bottom of his feet. He then pulled out a kunai from his holster and ran forward, trying his hardest to make it as far as he could up the tree.

Naruto marked his spot before gravity pulled him down. He landed on his feet, his gaze focused on the mark he left on the tree. He nodded once in satisfaction, taking in the fact that he was still improving. He contemplated on using his shadow clones to help speed up the progress, but Naruto wanted to leave the rest up to himself.

"Sasuke didn't need help…" Of course, Sasuke had minor medic-nin training, but Naruto didn't care. He just wanted to grow stronger, so that he could prove to Inari that heroes did in fact exist.

It pissed him off, just hearing Inari act the way the little kid did. Naruto knew for a fact that heroes existed, because…

"Itachi-san was a hero, dattebayo." Naruto knew that for a fact. It was because of Itachi that Naruto was still with his friends, living in the village he loved so dearly, even if most of its inhabitants harbored negativity toward him.

Naruto always wondered why people looked at him the way they did and it was on the day he received his hitai-ate from Iruka that Naruto finally found out from Mizuki. Sasuke had been there, as well.

It was terrifying, learning something such as that about one's self… Naruto was afraid that Sasuke would have just left him there and then after finding out the truth. Iruka showed some hesitance when Mizuki brought up the fact that he had lost his parents to the Kyuubi on the day Naruto was born.

The day Naruto was born was also the day the Fourth Hokage had sealed the Kyuubi inside of him. Knowing that, Naruto could understand why people looked at him the way they did. It still hurt, but he understood. He just wished they could look past the Kyuubi and notice him, Uzumaki Naruto, the
future Hokage—the boy who just wanted to be noticed by others.

On the day he first met Akimichi Chōko, Naruto had felt so happy to know that she wasn’t going to leave him. Most children did, after their parents told them to stay away from him. Yet, Chōko stayed and helped him make more friends.

Because of Chōko, Naruto had met Sasuke, Itachi, and Shisui. Because of Chōko, he wasn’t alone. Because of Chōko, those stares people gave him weren’t as harsh as they had been, now that he knew he wasn’t alone.

Chōko probably wouldn’t care if she found out that he was the container of the Kyuubi. Yet, Naruto was scared of the possibility that she would completely reject him—her and everyone else, even though Sasuke had told him that they would all saw him for who he was and not for what he contained.

"You're important, remember?"

That was what Sasuke told him. It was the same words that Naruto had been told by Itachi and Shisui.

"Shisui..." Naruto still missed his older brother. Even if Shisui was still alive in their many memories, Naruto just wished that the Uchiha were still with him.

Shisui might have broken his promise to stay alive, but Naruto could never hate him. He could never call the Uchiha a liar, either. Because Naruto wasn't like Inari...he knew when to mourn and move on. That was the point of the tree that had been planted in his backyard.

Ino had explained that people reacted differently to death and that sometimes, people needed help. That was why they had a side business in planting trees that contained the ashes of a person.

Whenever Naruto felt down, all he needed to do was look at the magnolia tree growing in his backyard, and the image of Shisui's smiling face would pop up in his mind. It was as though Shisui was telling him that everything is okay. And really, it was, because even though Shisui and the Uchiha were gone, Naruto still had his friends. He had people who supported him, who would protect him if he were in danger.

People who were probably aware of who he was, but stayed by his side, nonetheless. These people...they were important as well. And Naruto had grown up, being told that he was being protected because he was important.

"If so, then that means...I have to protect them as well!" It was only natural to want to protect that which is considered important. "Isn't that right, Shisui-nii?"

Naruto inhaled deeply and exhaled before running up the tree again. He knew he should have warmed up a bit before training, but for once, Naruto just wanted to keep going until he couldn't. He had something to prove and he would keep at it until his feelings got through to others.

"Maybe then...Inari will stop suffering!" Naruto could only hope.

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Naruto had never meant to fall asleep when he sat down to take a break. And yet, it happened. Naruto was only aware that this had happened when a delicate hand had grasped his shoulder and
gently shook him awake.

"You'll catch a cold if you sleep in a place like this." The voice was soft and when Naruto opened his eyes, he found himself looking at a pair of big, brown eyes framed by thick black eyelashes.

Naruto blinked a few times, taking in the flawless pale skin and glossy black hair that belonged to the young lady who had woke him up. He sat up, taking a moment to rub the sleep out of his eyes, before looking at the young lady again. She was still there, looking at him as if his well-being was of her concern.

"Who are you?" Naruto asked somewhat sluggishly.

When the young lady just smiled at him, Naruto felt his cheeks heat up and his drowsiness fade almost at once. He sat up straight, somewhat embarrassed that she had seen him in such a position.

"Did you wake me up, Nee-chan?" Naruto lightly scratched the side of his face with his index finger. "By the way, what are you doing?"

Naruto was honestly curious about why a young lady would be out so early in the morning.

"Picking herbs," was her response.

Naruto blinked. "Herbs?"

"That's right!" The young lady smiled at him. "It's to cure injuries and illness."

"D-Do you need any help-ttebayo?" Without even thinking, Naruto found himself asking the young lady if she needed assistance.

The young lady stared at him for a moment before smiling at him. "That would be nice."

…

Some time passed, and Naruto had never felt so glad to have learned all that there was to know about medicinal herbs from Ino. He had definitely caught the young lady by surprise when he had handed her an herb before she could even tell him which plants were which.

"Thanks for helping out!" The young lady smiled at him. "I'm Haku."

"I'm Uzumaki Naruto!" Naruto grinned widely as he handed Haku another herb. "You sure are working early-ttebayo."

"You too," Haku remarked. "What are you doing here so early in the morning?"

Naruto grinned and loudly replied, "Training!"

Haku blinked, her eyes focusing in on the hitai-ate Naruto wore on his forehead. "Could you be…a ninja?"

Naruto had never felt so happy to be recognized as a ninja. His face heated up as jabbed his thumb in his direction, gesturing at himself. "You noticed?! Yeah, I'm a ninja, dattebayo!"

"Wow, you're amazing." Haku smiled.

Naruto laughed and rubbed the back of his head. He felt so giddy to hear that from someone who barely even knew him.
"But why were you training?" Haku then asked, looking expectantly at him for an answer.

"I want to become stronger!" Naruto replied.

"But you look strong enough already…" Haku pursed her lips.

"No, no!" Naruto exclaimed. "I want to become even stronger, dattebayo!"

…

Haku narrowed her eyes. "Why…is that?"

"So that I can become the best of the best in my village-ttebayo!" Naruto held up his right hand, which was currently tightened into a fist. "I'm going to make everyone acknowledge my strength! And right now, I need to prove something to someone-ttebayo!"

"Is that for someone or yourself?" Haku looked closely at Naruto as she asked him that.

"Ha?!" Naruto made a face.

Haku giggled, prompting Naruto to ask what she found so funny. "Do you have someone who is important to you?"

"Important…" Naruto thought for a moment. "What are you trying to get at-ttebayo?"

Haku stayed silent. A certain look crossed her face, as she appeared lost in deep thought. It was as she was remembering something.

Naruto waited patiently for Haku to continue. A minute passed before she finally spoke again.

"When a person has something or someone to protect…" Haku began. "Then that's when they can truly become strong."

Naruto's eyes widened. He had never thought of it that way… "Yeah, I understand that-ttebayo! I have a lot of things I want to protect because—they're important to me, dattebayo!"

Haku smiled. "Then you will definitely become strong! Let's meet again somewhere…I need to go."

Haku grabbed the basket she had brought with her, now filled with the many herbs she and Naruto had picked. Just as she was about to stand up, she stopped, looked at Naruto with an innocent smile, and said, "I'm a boy, by the way."

Naruto was shocked to hear that someone so pretty could be male. Sure, Haku might have used "boku", but Chôko used that as well and she was a girl. Then again, Itachi was pretty enough to pass as a girl and Neji kept getting mistaken for a girl…so maybe it was Naruto's fault for making assumptions.

"Still, how could someone be so much cuter than Hinata-chan?!" Naruto just couldn't believe it. His gaze was still focused on Haku, who was giggling upon seeing his reaction. Naruto made a face and was about ready to say something when he noticed something in Haku's long, black hair.

Tilting his head to the side, Naruto was able to see that Haku had his hair up in a ponytail. But that wasn't what caught his attention—it was the green ribbon tied in Haku's hair that had caught Naruto's attention.

"Heeey…where did you get that ribbon-ttebayo?" Naruto asked, trying not to sound so suspicious,
as he did.

Haku stopped giggling. "Hmm? Oh, it was a gift from someone very important to me."

"You know, my friend has a ribbon like that." One that Naruto had only just noticed was missing from her appearance.

Haku blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah!" Naruto nodded his head. "It was a gift from me when we were kids. She was my very first friend, so I wanted to give her something that she might like."

"Did she like it?" Haku looked questioningly at Naruto.

Naruto grinned widely. "She liked it so much, she never stopped wearing it...well, that was until a missing-nin named Zabuza cut off her hair. I don't think she's noticed that it's missing yet, but when she does, she's going to freak-tttebayo!"

"Oh...I see..." Haku frowned. "Well, I hope you find it before she notices it's missing."

Naruto nodded his head. "Same here, dattebayo."

Haku left shortly afterwards. He walked rather calmly, for someone who was wearing Chōko's ribbon in his hair.

"A gift from someone important to him..." It didn't too long for Naruto to put two and two together. "That has to be Zabuza."

Who else was able to have access to a ribbon that Chōko always wore in her hair? It most definitely had to be the person who had cut off most of her hair. The ribbon had most likely been on the braid Zabuza had pocketed.

Naruto didn't know how Haku knew Zabuza. What Naruto did know, was that Haku wasn't as innocent as he had initially appeared. Naruto had taken a huge risk when he had mentioned Zabuza's name to the androgynous-looking boy.

"I need to tell the others..." It was something that they needed to know. "Chōko-chan's not gonna like this..."

It was at that moment that a Naruto felt something hard hit him over the head. He yelped and clutched his head as it throbbed. He clenched his teeth and looked up, finding himself staring at Sasuke, who was anything but amused.

"What was that for, dattebayo?!" Naruto exclaimed.

"For leaving without us, dumbass." Sasuke crossed his arms. "We were supposed to have left the house together. How long have you been out here?"

"I dunno...it was dark when I left-tttebayo." Naruto made a face. "Hey...Sasuke—did you see a very pretty person walk by you?"

"Were they wearing Chōko's ribbon in their hair?" Sasuke arched his brow at Naruto.

Naruto nodded his head. "Uh-huh!"

Sasuke sighed. "Chōko's going to freak..."
"Yeah, she is—but that person that you walked past knows Zabuza!" Naruto swallowed hard.
"That's where he got the ribbon…"

Sasuke's eyes widened. "You gotta be…We're going to have to be careful."

Naruto nodded his head. "We need to tell sensei, dattebayo!"

"Tell me what?" And lo and behold, there stood Kakashi, with Chōko at his side.

"Um…" Naruto realized he hadn't thought about how to break the news to Kakashi.

"Chōko, your ribbon's missing." Sasuke was anything but tactful when he said that.

"My ribbon…?" Chōko blinked a few times before she went completely still. Slowly, she ran her hand through her hair, her eyes widening when she noticed a certain something was missing. "Aaaaah, my ribbon! Nonononono—whyyyy?!"

Chōko's eyes started to glisten with tears seconds after it had come to her attention that her ribbon was missing. She looked about ready to cry.

"D-Don't cry, Chōko-chan!" Naruto never liked it when she cried.

"B-B-But…you gave me that ribbon." Chōko sniffed. "You got that for me and…it's gone! Uuuwah…"

"But it's not gone-ttebayo!" Naruto had just finished seeing it. "I know where it is!"

"If this is some stupid prank you're trying to pull, I'm going to slap you!" Chōko sniffed again as she took off her glasses to wipe her eyes.

"I swear, it isn't-ttebayo!" Naruto would never pull a prank that would make anyone cry! "Look—there's this person I just finished talking to and, well…he has it!"

"He?" Chōko made a face.

"Yeah, he was a very pretty person," Sasuke remarked. "Almost thought he was a girl, but Naruto is saying otherwise."

"His name is Haku and he said that someone important to him gave him that ribbon-ttebayo!" Naruto explained. "That person has to be Zabuza!"

…

"Chōko…" Kakashi began.

"I know—stay by your side." Chōko sighed as she put on her glasses. "Uuugh, I hate this…"

"Look on the bright side—at least you didn't punch Zabuza in the crotch." Sasuke might have had a point, but it still didn't mean Chōko wanted to hear it, as shown by how she nearly slapped Sasuke.

"I was eight years old!" Chōko exclaimed, her face currently red from embarrassment.

"Not many eight-year-olds can admit to punching an S-ranked missing-nin in the crotch." Kakashi chuckled upon hearing Chōko whine. "A Sannin, at that."

"You guys are horrible!" Chōko puffed up her cheeks, looking rather annoyed.
"But you love us, right?" Naruto felt the need to ask.

Chōko looked at him for a moment before sighing. "Right…so Haku has my ribbon?"

Naruto nodded his head. "Yeah! Of course, it looks better on you-ttebayo."

"You're just saying that because I'm your friend." Chōko smiled at him.

"No—I'm saying it because it's true, dattebayo!" Naruto's tone was firm. "There's just something about that ribbon that just makes it part of you! It's what makes you…well, you!"

To see someone else wear it was just weird. That's why he said what he said…

"I see…" Chōko looked surprised. "So that's why…heh, thanks."

"I'll make sure to get it back for you, dattebayo!" Naruto knew how attached Chōko had gotten to the ribbon he had given her. "It belongs to you, after all…"

"So are we gonna start training or what?" Sasuke asked as he stood on a tree branch high above in the air. "You're not going to get anywhere by just standing there!"

Naruto scowled at Sasuke, somewhat annoyed with how much of a show-off the Uchiha could be when he wanted to. "Just you wait, Sasuke! I'll make sure to master tree climbing and then—master walking on water!"

"One thing at a time, Naruto!" Sasuke said as he dashed over to a tree.

"Heeey!" Kakashi called out to him. "After you get down, you're gonna need to make some shadow clones to watch over Tazuna-san as he builds the bridge!"

After Naruto had marked his progress on the tree he had finished running up, he did just that. He made a total of five clones—just in case some of them accidentally dispelled on the way to the bridge. Of course, his clones could always make more clones, but it was still better to play it safe than sorry.

…

It was late in the afternoon when Naruto finally managed to master tree climbing. He had finally caught up to Sasuke and for that, Kakashi decided to move them and Chōko onto water walking. They made their way back to Tazuna's house, as his house was situated around water, with a wooden walkway encircling the house.

Water walking seemed easy at first, when Kakashi demonstrated to them after hopping off the walkway. He landed on the water as if it were solid ground and walked without any trouble. The only thing he needed was a little help getting back onto the walkway, which Chōko was able to do.

Then Chōko started them off, barely lasting a couple of seconds before plunging into the water. Naruto lasted a little longer than she did, and Sasuke lasted even longer than the both of them did. Even so, they were all in the water by the end of their first attempt at water walking. Kakashi sure had a good laugh…

Flash!

And a good memory to add to the photo album, with the rest of the pictures they had taken over the years. If Naruto wasn't annoyed with the fact that each and every failure, from here on out, would
end up with him in the water, he would have laughed. For now, he was busy trying to find Chōko's glasses, which had fallen off when she had landed in the water.

During their second attempt, in which Kakashi made sure that Chōko had given him her glasses before anything, Sasuke still lasted the longest out of the three of them and for that, Naruto deliberately made the Uchiha lose his balance. Sasuke was not happy, especially since landing face-forward onto the water was anything less than painful.

Still, it made Naruto feel better…that was until Sasuke dunked his head under the water.

*Splash! Splash! Splash!*

"That'll…teach you…to mess with me!" Sasuke was scowling.

Naruto was coughing by the time Sasuke had stopped dunking his head under the water. It was not a pleasant experience, so Naruto decided not to do that again. He liked being able to breathe…

About an hour later, Chōko was wobbling on the water, lasting a good thirteen seconds before plunging into the water. Naruto had decided to include his shadow clones into the mix after falling one too many times into the water. It was certainly amusing to see so many of his clones fall into the water after each and every attempt.

As for Sasuke, he was able to take a few wobbly steps without falling in, while Chōko and Naruto could barely even keep their balance just standing on top of water. It was around that time that Naruto gained some information in regards to Tazuna coming home. One of his clones must have dispelled itself to send the message.

"I think it's about time to call it a day," Kakashi suddenly said. "Wouldn't do any good for you to be too exhausted to get out of the water, now would it?"

Naruto understood completely when he saw how difficult it was to pull himself onto the wooden walkway. His body felt heavy and after practicing for so long on such an unstable surface, it felt weird to walk on a solid surface. It felt even heavier after all of his clones dispelled themselves.

"This is why you have to be careful when you use your shadow clones for that," Kakashi remarked.

Naruto said nothing and just made his way into the house. Tsunami had left them a couple of towels to dry off when they had entered. And when Chōko's hair had come out looking like a fluffy dandelion after she had finished drying her hair, everyone had a good laugh…well, except her, especially since Kakashi decided to take a picture there and then, much to Chōko's annoyance.

Even though Naruto had grown used to seeing Chōko with long hair in a braid, he could honestly get used to her new haircut if it meant seeing it like this.

"Team Spiky Hair!" Naruto repeated the name Chōko had given their team.

Chōko stuck her tongue out at him in response.

"It's honestly not that bad." Sasuke honestly should have been able to dodge Chōko's wet towel when she threw it at his face. It was his fault entirely when it slapped him in the face.

"I don't want to hear it!" Chōko tried her hardest to smooth down her hair, but to no avail.

"Hmph…"
"Like a baby bird," Kakashi remarked. "Or konpeitō…which I have—want some?"

Sure enough, Kakashi did have a small bottle full of konpeitō. Naruto honestly wasn't expecting that, especially since Kakashi wasn't a fan of sweets. Then again, neither was Sasuke, but Sasuke was there to get some konpeitō with Chōko. If anything, Sasuke was the type of person to eat anything that was offered to him…well, so long as it wasn't nattō.

"You want any, Naruto?" Kakashi shook the glass bottle containing konpeitō at him.

Naruto looked at the bottle for a few seconds before walking over to Kakashi. He wasn't going to pass up candy…

Sometime later, Naruto, Sasuke, and Chōko were waiting in the guest room for Tsunami to finish making dinner. Kakashi had stayed down stairs to talk with Tsunami and Tazuna. Nothing much was really happening, except Sasuke falling asleep in his futon. Chōko was still awake and was currently bundled up in her blanket, trying to warm up after changing into a set of dry clothes.

As for Naruto, he was mostly just staring at his teammates, somewhat bored out of his wits. Then Chōko decided to ask him a question that certainly caught his attention.

"Hey, you think you can teach me that move?" Chōko looked questioningly at him.

Naruto felt his face heat up, as he couldn't even begin to imagine how the move would work for a girl. Still, it seemed interesting enough for him to give it a try. If he was able to teach Konohamaru, an eight-year-old, the Oiroke no Jutsu, then Chōko shouldn't have a hard time learning it.

He was wrong…so, so very wrong.

"If you don't let me see, then how am I supposed to know you're doing it right-ttebayo?" Naruto asked as he tried pulling off the blanket Chōko was using to cover herself.

"I didn't think it'd be that embarrassing!" Chōko exclaimed. "This is so weird!"

"If Konohamaru can do it, then so can you, dattebayo!" This was getting ridiculous.

"What the hell is going on?" Well, it looks like Sasuke had just woken up.

Naruto and Chōko turned to look at their somewhat drowsy Uchiha friend. He yawned and blinked a few times, his eyes widening when he noticed what was going on—that being Naruto trying to pull off the blanket Chōko was using to cover herself while she was using the Oiroke no Jutsu.

Sasuke was quick to turn the other way, so his back was to his teammates and his eyes completely off the scene. "I saw nothing."

"Pfft…ahahahahaha!" Chōko started laughing rather hard, very much amused with Sasuke's reaction.

Naruto took the moment, while Chōko was distracted, to pull the blanket off of her. Instead of seeing what he usually did with Konohamaru and himself, which should have been a naked older, female version of themselves with well-endowed proportions, he found himself looking at something different. Chōko was certainly taller, from the looks of her long legs. She was also sporting a shapely figure, but was not as endowed as Naruto had been expecting. Her hair was longer and lacked any sign of its natural spikiness, looking more sleek and silky. And she was wearing a tiger-striped bikini with go-go boots of the same color and pattern.
"This is what you were embarrassed to show off, dattebayo?" Naruto couldn't believe it. "At least you're wearing clothes—why are you wearing them?"

Chōko made a face and dispelled the technique. "I didn't want to flash you my boobs—fake or not!"

"Why should you even care for something you don't even have?" Naruto realized he shouldn't have said that, seconds after saying it.

"Because it still feels like something I have!" Chōko puffed up her cheeks. "It's just embarrassing, dammit…"

"You know, the point of the Oiroke is to feel completely comfortable about your body-ttebayo." Then again, Naruto didn't feel as connected to the technique as Chōko did, to care about flashing his fabricated proportions to people. "Maybe you should practice with your clothes on instead of that outfit? You're doing it right, at least."

"That's good to hear…" Chōko exhaled shakily. "I should practice first with these clothes…"

"Or maybe you shouldn't do it at all!" Sasuke exclaimed. "Can you do this some other time, like back home, when there isn't an eight-year-old boy in the vicinity? Wasn't Konohamaru enough?"

"It's not like I'm teaching it to Inari-ttebayo…" And Konohamaru had requested to learn the move from him.

"And at least I'm wearing something!" Chōko huffed. "You know, you could probably learn a bit from me, in regards to clothing yourself when you use the move."

Naruto tilted his head to the side. "Huh?"

"I'm sure you'll get more reactions if you use outfits, like a swimsuit or something…" Chōko's face was starting to grow red. "Uuumm…I'll shut up."

Naruto thought about it for a moment. "Maybe…I should ask Ero-sennin for some tips."

"Or maybe you should use him for practice instead?" Chōko suggested.

"You know, I think you should listen to Chōko…please?" Sasuke looked at him pleadingly.

"Hmm…" Naruto crossed his arms.

"Just think of his reactions!" Chōko exclaimed. "It'd be better when he least expects it!"

That was enough to convince Naruto to go along with Chōko's suggestions. "Okay, I'll practice on him, then-ttebayo!"

Sasuke honestly looked relieved…then Naruto decided to ask him something that made his face turn red like a tomato.

"How does your Oiroke no Jutsu look?" Naruto had heard that Sasuke had learned it by accident with his Sharingan.

"Yeah, how does it look?" Chōko looked curiously at Sasuke, who was starting to look uncomfortable.

"H-How should I know when I haven't even tried to use it?!" Sasuke snapped at them.
Naruto turned to Chōko, who looked at him. A moment passed before they grinned and snickered, turning their attention back on Sasuke afterwards.

"Leave me out of this, please…" Sasuke practically begged as he began to back away from his friends.

"You know…you could use this technique to escape your fangirls," Chōko remarked.

That, apparently, was all it took for Sasuke to look at the Oiroke no Jutsu in a different light. It was enough for Naruto to start laughing when Sasuke decided to give it a try and…it honestly wasn't bad for a first attempt.

"A little flat-chested, but we can fix that-ttebayo!" Naruto had noticed that Sasuke had gone through with the suggestion he had given Chōko, in regards to starting out with clothes.

"You know, to some guys, a flat-chest is a status symbol—practically a rarity," Chōko suddenly said, earning all attention on her. "I-I hear stuff…"

"Ehh, I don't think that would work on people like Ero-sennin-ttebayo." Naruto knew for a fact that Jiraiya had a thing for women with well-endowed chests. "But like you said, it could work for others."

Sasuke dispelled the technique and sighed. "I'm gonna call it quits for today…can we try this again when we're back in Konoha?"

"Okay!" Naruto was certainly looking forward to it. "Hey…since you learned it by accident with your Sharingan, do you think…Kakashi-sensei learned it too, dattebayo?"

"We should ask him." Chōko had been the first of them to speak.

"We should." Sasuke agreed.

"Let's go, then, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaimed, feeling rather excited to see the expression Kakashi had on his face when they asked him about the Oiroke no Jutsu.

Dinner certainly proved to be interesting when Kakashi refused to even look at his Genin. Tazuna just coughed, trying to forget what had gone on during the fight with Zabuza. And Tsunami had taken to telling Inari to forget what he had heard.

When Naruto, Sasuke, Chōko, and Kakashi had settled down in their futons for the night, Naruto had found himself thinking over today's events. Apart from a rather shocking realization that came from talking to Haku, it had been a good day.

Then Chōko turned to face him and whispered rather quietly, "I'm sorry I lost your ribbon."

"It's not your fault-ttebayo," Naruto whispered back. "Just like it's not your fault that Zabuza cut off your hair—stuff happens, okay?"

"Okay…” Chōko certainly sounded better after that. "Goodnight…"
"Goodnight…” Naruto sighed before being hit over the head with a pillow, courtesy of a rather exhausted Sasuke.

"Go to sleep, you two…” Sasuke looked at them with bleary eyes, his hair very much disheveled. He placed his pillow back on the futon and let his head drop onto it.

"Maa, it's best you do as Sasuke says—it's going to be a long day tomorrow," Kakashi told them. "That said, goodnight."

...

Sometimes, Naruto's thoughts would wander back on the past, when he had no one but himself. There had never been anyone, but the Sandaime, to greet him with a smile. Nor was there anyone to tell him goodnight, as the caretakers at the orphanage did to the other orphans. Naruto had been on his own, but now…he wasn't. He had people who cared for him, people who would tell him goodnight.

It was such a mundane thing and yet, it was something that Naruto wanted to protect. He fell asleep with a smile on his face, his thoughts having shifted over to what Haku had told him earlier.

"When a person has something or someone to protect…Then that's when they can truly become strong."

Naruto would definitely become strong…that was a fact.

...

...

Two days had passed, in which Naruto, Sasuke, and Chōko grew very well acquainted with the water. Much progress had been made, to the point that Naruto and Sasuke finally managed to master water walking. The only one lagging behind was Chōko, who, ironically, possessed an affinity for water. She did not appreciate the irony and would splash water at anyone who would mention it—that being Kakashi, who just enjoyed messing with Chōko.

Kakashi now only needed one crutch for support and was currently keeping an eye on Chōko as she continued to improve her water walking. Meanwhile with Naruto and Sasuke, Naruto was teaching Sasuke how to use the Kage Bunshin no Jutsu. It…went as badly as anyone would have expected it to go.

The technique was a tad bit too advanced for Sasuke to learn so easily. Even with the Sharingan, Sasuke still had trouble making one shadow clone. Though, by the late evening, Sasuke had managed to successfully make a single shadow clone, though at the cost of him passing out from exhaustion. Chōko…still needed more practice with water walking, much to her complete annoyance.

Come the next day, Chōko had managed to master water walking by the midafternoon, to which Kakashi then began teaching her how to make a water clone. Sasuke was well on his way to making another shadow clone. Naruto was just having the time of his life, being an instructor of some sort to his friends. And Kakashi's body was almost back to normal.

When Chōko had successfully made a water clone, which wasn't too hard for her, as her affinity was water, Kakashi decided to call it a day and spent the rest of the afternoon training his body. Naruto, Sasuke, and Chōko took to watching Kakashi train, helping him out when he was doing push-ups with one hand, using only his index finger while he carried the three of them on his back. It was
honestly a fun experience, in Naruto's opinion.

"I wanted to ask you earlier, but...why are you still here when I lied to you about the mission?" Tazuna had asked Kakashi, minutes after he had arrived home.

Kakashi continued doing his push-ups, Sasuke helping keep count for him. Kakashi was nearly at two-hundred, by now. "To abandon your duty is not courageous. Below courageous, there is nothing...Those are the words of the previous Hokage. That is the way of the shinobi. Shinobi don't move because of money alone."

"Heeey...are we gonna guard Tazuna tomorrow?" Naruto decided to ask. "We're ready, aren't we- ttebayo?"

"We sure are!" Kakashi smiled. "Oh, and can you three get off me? I'm done."

Naruto, Sasuke, and Chōko didn't hesitated to listen to Kakashi. Right after they had gotten off of him, Kakashi stood up and moved his hand around, opening and closing it a few times afterwards.

"You three have come a long ways during these past six days," Kakashi remarked.

"And you're almost done with the bridge, aren't you?" Naruto looked at Tazuna, who nodded. Naruto had found out about that through his clones.

"Just a little bit more, and it'll be finished." Tazuna smiled at them. "I'm rather worn out from today's work."

"Nobody quit today, so that's good-ttebayo." Naruto learned that, once again, through his clones.

"I'll never get how your ninja techniques work." Tazuna let out a puff of air.

... During dinner, Naruto had noticed that Inari was staring at him. He said nothing and just continued eating his dinner. Then Inari started crying and Naruto felt the need to know what was going on.

"What is it?"

"Why do you guys bother to try so hard?!" Inari was quite loud when he responded. "No matter how hard you train, you're still no match for Gatou's men! No matter what claims you make or how hard you work, when facing the strong, the weak will only end up getting killed!"

Naruto stared at Inari for a good minute before saying, "Whatever, kid...I'm not like you."

He went back to eating shortly afterwards, not really taking much notice of how much quieter it had gotten at the table.

"Shut up!" Inari blurted out. "It pisses me off when I watch you! You don't know anything about this country, yet you're being so nosy!"

Naruto said nothing and continued eating. Inari probably needed to vent—Sasuke sure did when his clan had been massacred.

"What the hell do you even know about me?!" Inari continued to yell. "I'm different from you, who is always clowning around and acting so cheerful! You don't know how hard life can be!"

"Hey, stop that," Sasuke suddenly said. "Don't you ever talk to Naruto like that...you got that?"
Inari stared at Sasuke, who was currently glaring at him.

"He's been through much more than you ever will…and you should consider yourself lucky."
Sasuke still lacked tact, as usual, but he was irritated. "Because at least you were never alone, like he was…"

"Sasuke…" Chōko frowned.

"No—I'm done letting this little kid talk to Naruto like that!" Sasuke scowled. "Sure, Naruto likes to clown around—we all do, but does that mean we don't have it rough? Hell no! It's the opposite, actually. We clown around because our life is rough! It's how we get through each and every day, just focusing on the positives instead of the negatives. So stop acting like you're the only one suffering, you crybaby!"

...

Inari ran out of the house, sobbing rather hard from what Sasuke had finished telling him.

"Sasuke!" Chōko snapped. "That was uncalled for!"

Sasuke turned away from Chōko. "I don't care…I just hate it when people talk about Naruto like that. It just isn't fair."

"It also isn't fair to push an eight-year-old civilian like that." Chōko looked sternly at Sasuke. "There are better ways to say stuff like that."

"I don't see you saying anything…" Sasuke huffed.

Naruto sighed and got out of his seat. "I'll go talk to him-ttebayo."

...

Naruto found Inari sitting at the edge of the walkway outside of the house. The little boy held his knees to his chest, trying his hardest to stop crying. Naruto never liked it when people cried…

"Hey, sorry about what Sasuke said-ttebayo," Naruto said as he plopped down next to Inari. "He was never one for being tact, so don't let him get to you."

"…" Inari sniffed.

"The old man told us about your father, Kaiza, ya know…" Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "And, well…I never knew my father. I never knew my mother, either. I grew up alone, wondering why people would always look at me as if I've done something wrong. It was difficult, and it hurt. I cried a lot, like you…but no one ever listened to me-ttebayo."

Even now, it was still hard for him to forget. The memories just never wanted to leave…

"I mean, it just wasn't fair-ttebayo."

"When I was your age, I lost someone very important to me." Naruto exhaled shakily. "He was my older brother—even though we weren't related by blood. He was actually Sasuke's cousin."
"Wh-What happened to him?" Inari finally spoke.

Naruto smiled wistfully. "He committed suicide—even though he promised Chōko-chan he wouldn't die-ttebayo. Before he died, he…he said his wish for Tanabata was to spend more time with me."

"What a liar…" Inari sounded rather bitter.

"At first, I didn't want to believe it, but he really was gone." It was a reality Naruto had to deal with every day. "And yeah, sometimes I feel as if he did lie to us…but then I remember what he told me. He said that one doesn't truly die until they're forgotten. He lived his life to the fullest, making sure we would never forget him, dattebayo."

In their memories, Shisui would live forever.

"How did you ever get over it—his death, I mean?" Inari seemed to have relaxed a bit.

"I read somewhere that if you want to keep a soul in this world, you plant a tree over their grave…" Naruto began. "The tree then absorbs the soul and keeps it in this world. We used some of his ashes to mix in with the tree we planted-ttebayo. I…never really got over his death, but the tree…it helped me and my friends move on. Especially since we didn't get access to his ashes until after something terrible had happened."

"Wh-What happened?" Inari was growing more and more comfortable around him.

Naruto tried his best to ignore the memories of the day he and his friends came across the scene of the Uchiha Clan Massacre. Even now, the image burned into his memory was as vivid as ever. "Sasuke…used to have a family. It was so huge, that they had their own district where they lived. They…used to be distance towards me before they accepted me. It was as if I was part of that family, dattebayo. It was nice…then one day, when my friends and I came back from a festival, they were gone. Someone—we still don't know who—killed all of Sasuke's family. Only he and his older brother were left after that."

And then Itachi left the village later that year…

"There was so much blood and Sasuke's parents—they were just lying there-ttebayo…" Naruto had to remind himself that it was just a memory—that he wasn't really there again. "That tree helped us move on…it was as if he was telling us everything was going to be okay."

"Was it?" Inari frowned.

"It was…then this mean man came into our village and tried to take me." Naruto scowled. "He almost killed Chōko-chan and it's because of him that she's afraid of snakes. It's also because of him that Sasuke's older brother, Itachi, had to leave. It was either him or me, and Itachi-san felt that I was more important than he was, so he left with the man-ttebayo. He was labeled a traitor by everyone in the village for that…but Sasuke never thought Itachi-san was a traitor. Sasuke said…Itachi-san was a hero."

"Hero…" Inari repeated.

"Yeah…when you said heroes didn't exist, I felt mad…because Itachi-san was a hero-ttebayo." Naruto would never forget that. "It's because of him that I'm still with everyone else. It's because of him…that I'm still home, with everyone, dattebayo. I'm all that Sasuke has left of his family after everything. We're brothers, you know…"

"Not blood-related, though…" Inari remarked.
"Yeah…like you and Kaiza." Naruto smiled. "I know it hurts, but sometimes you have to stay strong in order to protect everything that is important to you-ttebayo. Do you have anything that's important to you?"

Inari thought for a moment and then nodded his head. "Jii-chan and Okaa-chan…"

"Then you, too, can become strong." Naruto grinned widely at Inari. "That's why Kaiza was as strong as he was, to the very end-ttebayo. You were part of what was important to him…that's why Gatou killed him. Gatou was afraid of your father, because he showed everyone that it was possible for anyone to be strong, so long as they had something important to protect."

"S-Strong…" Inari looked down.

"We'll keep Tazuna safe from Gatou." Naruto would make sure of that. "Then he'll finish building the bridge and whatever power Gatou had over this country will just disappear. We'll make sure of that, dattebayo."

When Inari started crying and latched onto Naruto, Naruto knew that his words had finally reached the eight-year-old boy.

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When Naruto woke up the next morning, he found Chōko organizing her smoke bombs. When he asked her why, she said she didn't want a repeat of last time.

"I'm gonna also take my senbon…” Chōko added. "I know I'm not that experienced with them, but I still want to take them with me—just in case."

Naruto blinked a few times and nodded his head. "It's good to be safe, but don't you ever think you're a little too paranoid?"

"I'd rather be paranoid than dead!" Chōko huffed. "I'm just not taking my chances with Zabuza—he should be close to recovering from his momentary death, ya know!"

"Right…” Naruto remembered.

"So…since we're all leaving with Tazuna-san…” Chōko began. "Maybe you should leave a few of your shadow clones here to watch over Inari and Tsunami-san."

"Let me change first-ttebayo!" Naruto was still in his pajamas.

...

Naruto found himself smiling when he saw Inari messing around with one of his shadow clones. It was cute, in the way a civilian was interacting with something they had little to no experience with. He and his teammates left with Tazuna shortly after breakfast.

When they finally reached the bridge, they came across the scene of a group of workers sprawled out on the ground. At first glance, they appeared dead, but they were merely knocked unconscious. Sasuke was quick confirm that.

"What happened?!" Tazuna asked one of the workers, who had managed to maintain their consciousness.
"A monster…" the worker replied before coughing and fainting.

It was around that moment that Naruto had noticed how misty it was starting to get. He knew something was wrong and took a kunai out of his holster to arm himself.

"This is the Kirigakure no Jutsu…right?" Sasuke asked Kakashi.

"Correct…don't lower your guard!" Kakashi said as he pushed Tazuna closer to their group.

"Long time no see, Kakashi." It was Zabuza. "I see you're still with those brats…"

"They're my kids…and I don't intend to part with them any time soon." Kakashi smiled. "Not while I'm their Jounin."

"We'll see about that…" Zabuza sounded closer.

Naruto barely suppressed a shriek that wanted to leave his mouth when he realized they were surrounded by multiples of Zabuza, all armed and ready to attack.

"Do it, Sasuke!" Kakashi exclaimed.

Sasuke dashed off, holding a kunai in each hand. Within the blink of an eye, each and every Zabuza was reduced to a puddle of water. They had been water clones, the real Zabuza still out of sight.

"You can't fool me!" Sasuke spat. "Chōko, go for it!"

"Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu!" Chōko didn't waste any time making use of the water surrounding them. Soon, water clones of Chōko surrounded themselves around Tazuna, all of them armed with kunai and shuriken.

"So not only did he see through the clones, but she managed to make her own clones." Naruto did not like the look Zabuza had on his face as he looked at Chōko. By now, Zabuza had made his appearance and he wasn't alone. Standing by his side, was the hunter-nin that had interrupted the fight between him and Kakashi.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't look at my Genin like that," Kakashi said as he pushed Chōko behind himself. "Wasn't her hair enough?"

"Not much of a trophy if she's still alive, huh?" Zabuza chuckled darkly.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" Chōko suddenly blurted out. "That's what this was all about?!"

Naruto didn't like how amused Zabuza was with Chōko's reaction.

"She certainly has a lot of potential," the hunter-nin at Zabuza's side said calmly. "It's only natural for her to have caught your eye—right, Zabuza-sama?"

Naruto did not like the sound of that…he did not like anything about this at all. He certainly didn't like how familiar the hunter-nin at Zabuza's side sounded. He especially hated how he could make out the green ribbon tied in the hunter-nin's hair.

"You…you're...Haku, right?" Naruto clenched his teeth when he saw the hunter-nin respond to his voice.

The hunter-nin tilted his head and then removed his mask, revealing the very face of the person Naruto had once mistaken for female. "Hello again, Naruto-kun."
"So Zabuza...is your important person-ttebayo?" Naruto seriously hated his luck.

Haku smiled. "I am his tool."

"He'll do what he is told," Zabuza remarked. "Don't expect him to go easy on you just because you know each other."

"I apologize." Haku smiled sweetly as he held up a couple of senbon that were in between his fingers. "But I must do what I am told...so long as Zabuza-sama wills it."

Naruto had never been so mad in his life. For Haku to consider himself a tool...and Zabuza to reinforce it was just...it was just wrong.

"Haku...go!" Zabuza suddenly said.

Within the blink of an eye, Haku sped forward. It had happened so quickly when he had thrown his senbon at Sasuke. Were it not for Sasuke using one of Chōko's water clones as a substitution, Sasuke could have been seriously hurt. The senbon had pierced the water clone's throat in the same way they had once pierced Zabuza's throat. The only difference, Naruto could only assume, was that Haku had intended to kill.

Chōko looked about ready to throw up after seeing one of her clones revert back into water. The sight of seeing senbon pierce her clone's throat was probably what did it. About a second later, thanks to Sasuke's quick actions, he had been able to deflect a direct attack from Haku. Using only his kunai, Sasuke was able to keep Haku, armed only with a single senbon, back.

"I don't want to have to kill you..." Haku pursed his lips. "But you won't stand down, will you?"

"As if!" Sasuke spat.

"Hmm-Hmm...you are only fortunate that your friend over there has used up most of the water for her clones." Haku smiled. "But not fortunate enough."

Naruto couldn't believe what he saw next. Seeing someone using only one hand, and so quickly at that, to make seals was just unbelievable—even Kakashi seemed surprised. Haku had nearly managed to successfully form each and every seal his technique had required...then Chōko let out an outburst that left Haku red-faced and completely stunned.

"You're gorgeous!" Chōko had been loud and clear, and, through experience, Naruto could tell she meant what she had said. It was no wonder Haku reacted the way he did—anyone would, if they didn't know what type of person Chōko was.

Sasuke didn't hesitate to take advantage of the situation, managing to knock Haku on his back while he was still stunned. It was only after Haku had landed on the ground that he finally snapped out of it, but his gaze was still on Chōko, whose face was probably as red as his was.

"Looks like you found yourself a girlfriend." Zabuza had sounded so amused.

"Denied!" Kakashi said as he crossed his arms in front of himself in the shape of an X. "Naruto, I need you to watch everyone's back—keep your guard up!"

Naruto blinked and nodded. He had mostly just been watching, but only because he was still trying to get over the fact that, if push came to shove, he had to kill Haku. The life of his teammates outweighed Haku's...as much as Naruto didn't want to admit it.
"Those who do not take care of their comrades are lower than trash…" Naruto remembered Kakashi's words on the day he passed them. He understood those words. He just…never thought it could possibly come to this.

"Exactly." Kakashi nodded his head. "You really should watch your mouth when it comes to these kids."

"Still looks like a bunch of brats to me—except for the girl over there." Zabuza was looking at Chōko again.

"Chōko-chan just happens to be Konohagakure's door-breaking glasses girl," Kakashi said as he brought his hand down on Chōko's head to ruffle her hair. He didn't flinch when she slapped his hand away.

"I stopped breaking doors ages ago, you jerk!" Chōko scowled.

"Maa, what was it that Konohamaru called you again, then?" Kakashi tilted his head to the side. "Big Boss, was it? Certainly seems like a fitting nickname for a leader such as you. Of course, then there's our Rookie of the Year, Sasuke."

"Hn…" Sasuke crossed his arms.

"And who could forget our most unpredictable ninja, Naruto?" Only Kakashi could say something like that without it sounding like an insult.

"Damn straight, dattebayo!" Naruto looked sternly at Zabuza.

…

"Haku, stop playing around—you can worry about your crushes later." Zabuza focused his attention back on Haku.

"R-Right," Haku said as he got off the ground. Without warning, he flung an array of senbon in Tazuna's direction. Of course, the actual target of the senbon had been Chōko's water clones.

That still didn't stop Sasuke from creating a shadow clone to pull Tazuna out of the way. It was a smart move, considering the water from the clones splashed the ground, nearly covering it all.

Water and Kirigakure shinobi were a rather deadly combination.

The air began to grow cold after that as Haku concentrated, his hands formed into a seal. It took Naruto a couple of seconds to realize what was happening. That was when Haku's ulterior motive to dispelling Chōko's water clones was revealed.

The water from the clones rose from the ground, soon forming into what appeared to be mirrors made of ice. It was much colder than it had been before, and Naruto was having trouble believing what he was seeing—him and everyone else, sans Zabuza.

"Makyō Hyōshō!" Haku exclaimed.

Within the span of a minute, mirrors formed all around them, almost like a dome. Had Sasuke not sent his shadow clone to move Tazuna out of the way when Haku had attacked Chōko's water clones, he, too, would have been with them, surrounded by mirrors made of ice. Then, without warning, Zabuza came and pushed Kakashi out of the dome. It was at that point that every mirror now possessed a reflection of Haku.
How that had happened, Naruto was still trying to process what he had just seen. He had seen Haku going into a mirror. That, alongside the fact that Haku had created these mirrors, was something Naruto was still having trouble understanding.

"Let's begin," Haku suddenly said.

Before Naruto could even blink, pain began to register itself within his body. Something had just grazed his shoulder and he could tell...that he wasn't the only one who had been hurt. Right now, Chōko was struggling not to freak out as Sasuke pulled out the senbon that had went through his hand. Seconds after Sasuke had pulled out the senbon, another one was thrown and this time, it grazed Chōko's neck.

Naruto had never been so glad to just see a weapon graze someone's neck. It was certainly better than seeing it pierce Chōko's neck, that's for sure.

"Please don't take this the hard way...I'm only doing as I am told." Haku smiled, a light blush tinging his cheeks. "For what it was worth, I did appreciate your compliment."

As soon as Haku had said that, senbon began to rain down on them in every direction. The pain was constant, even though it wasn't serious, just simple grazes here and there. It was mostly the fact that the attack was continuous that made it so hard to even move.

When Naruto had tried moving, he found himself yelping when a senbon pierced his foot. Even the slightest movement was risky, he had found out the hard way. There was no escape—they were stuck.

Well, that was until Chōko had somehow managed to detonate a smoke bomb. Haku still continued to throw senbon, and the senbon continued to hurt them, but each throw Haku made was no longer accurate, as he could no longer see them. After a minute, Haku had ceased attacked, allowing Naruto, Sasuke, and Chōko a moment to breathe.

Naruto could barely make out the faint glow of green coming from Sasuke's hands as he healed himself. Chōko, in a very quiet voice, was counting down—most likely keeping track of how long the smoke was going to last. Unlike last time, Chōko had used the correct smoke bomb.

Haku was probably waiting for the smoke to clear before he continued his attack. Naruto was hoping that was the case when he created four shadow clones. He had each of them make their way through the smoke to look for any openings. Each time a clone was dispelled, Naruto made more until it came to his attention that one of out of the four he had created had yet to dispel.

"It made it out..." That had to be the case.

"Ten...nine...eight...seven...six..." Chōko continued her count down.

Naruto had noticed that the green glow had disappeared, so Sasuke had finished healing himself. Naruto only had a couple of seconds to make this count, so when Chōko had finally reached zero, he made as many shadow clones as he could before the smoke began to clear. Naruto was only lucky that one the shadow clones had made it out of the dome of ice, because it had been able to distract Haku long enough for him to not continue his attack.

It was for only a short moment, but it gave Sasuke the opportunity to use the Goukakyuu on a mirror. At the same time, Chōko had ran over to a mirror and, using her full strength, smashed it with her fist. While Sasuke had not been able to melt the ice, Chōko had at least been able to break an opening for them.
“Hurry up!” she yelled as she dashed outside the dome.

Sasuke didn't hesitate to do what he was told. Naruto, on the other hand, decided to stay behind with his clones and try his best to break the mirrors. It was not the best decision he had ever made, especially since Haku was somehow able to move so quickly from mirror to mirror, managing to land an attack on each and every clone that had tried to destroy a mirror.

Soon, it was just only Naruto standing alone in the dome, all of his clones having been dispelled. He made a face when he heard Sasuke and Chōko yelling at him.

"Nice try," Haku remarked. "But this jutsu uses the mirror's reflection to transport me. From my point of view, you seem to be moving in slow-motion."

Well, fuck...at least Naruto was able to learn something. He still wished it wasn't under these sort of circumstances.

SMASH!

"Idiot!" Chōko yelled after smashing another mirror. "Move!"

"Watch out!" Sasuke barely managed to push Chōko out of the way from an array of senbon Haku had finished throwing.

"Hmm..." Haku retreated back into a mirror, his attention focused on Naruto. "You know...if it's possible, I do not want to kill you. And I do not want to make you kill me. However, if you are going to fight me, I will kill my compassion with a blade and become a true shinobi."

SMASH!

Chōko had smashed yet another mirror. By now, her hands were beginning to bleed. Sasuke didn't waste any time healing her.

"This bridge is a battleground that leads to the dreams of many people," Haku continued. "I will fight for my dream. And you will fight for your dream. Please do not hold any grudges. I just want to protect an important person."

That person had to be Zabuza... Naruto still couldn't believe someone like Haku could work for such a man.

"I want to work for him, fight for him, and make his dreams come true." Haku smiled. "That is my dream. In order to make it come true, I will become a shinobi. I will kill you!"

SMASH!

Chōko smashed yet another mirror. That time, it had sounded close and when Naruto felt himself being pulled back by Sasuke, he knew why. He was only lucky that Sasuke had pulled him then, otherwise, Naruto was sure that Haku would have filled his body with many senbon.

"Dumbass..." Chōko huffed as she shook her fist. "You hurt?"

"N-No..." Well, he was, but not too seriously...at least, Naruto thought so.

"I'll be the judge of that!" Sasuke said as he looked over Naruto. "You really shouldn't have stayed in like that—you're lucky Chōko was able to break those mirrors."

"They're not as fragile as they seem," Chōko remarked. "Next time, when I say leave—leave! Sensei
said that Haku is someone with a kekkei genkai!"

Naruto blinked. "Kekkei genkai…you mean like Hinata-chan and Sasuke?"

"Yeah…” Sasuke said as he began to heal Naruto's wounds. "Against someone like him, we can't beat him so easily…"

"That's because I taught him everything I knew," Zabuza suddenly said. He was currently fighting off Kakashi, his kunai currently impaled in Kakashi's hand. "And he proceeded to improve his own techniques, eventually surpassing me. Even facing the greatest adversity, he succeeded. Without heart nor fear of death, he is a fighting machine known as a shinobi."

Kakashi didn't even flinched when Zabuza had pulled out the kunai impaled in his hand. Nor did he take his eyes off of Zabuza.

"I gained a high quality tool for myself." Zabuza almost sounded boastful when he said that. "Unlike the scraps that follow you around. The only talented one I see is that girl. To kill her would be such a waste of potential, so why don't you give her to me? I can raise her well to become someone like Haku."

"That's why he's so interested in her!" The thought of his friend becoming someone like Haku, who referred to himself as a tool, was horrifying to Naruto.

"You…gotta be…kidding me…” Chōko was wide-eyed from shock.

"I really don't appreciate the attention you're giving my Genin!" Kakashi lifted his hitai-ate, uncovering his left eye. "Let's begin!"

Just as Kakashi and Zabuza were about to clash, Zabuza used the Kirigakure no Jutsu yet again. The mist was much thicker than before, and Zabuza was completely hidden. Naruto, Sasuke, and Chōko never saw him coming when he grabbed all three of them and threw them back into the dome with Haku.

"Not this shit again!" Sasuke yelled.

"Hmm…Hmm…We meet again." Haku smiled at them before putting on his mask and entering a mirror. "Have enough time to recover? Because I'm not going easy this time…"

When Haku threw the first senbon, it had gone through Sasuke's knee. The next one right after that went into Naruto's back. It hurt…especially since Haku threw more. Soon, he, Sasuke, and Chōko all had senbon sticking out of their backs.

Haku hadn't been kidding when he said he wasn't going easy this time…

"Whoa!" Naruto exclaimed when Sasuke suddenly pushed him and Chōko out of the way of Haku's senbon.

"S-Sorry…” Sasuke said before beginning to pull the senbon out of their backs. By now, he had activated his Sharingan. "I just…couldn't let him hit us again."

"It's fine…” Naruto winced when Sasuke pulled out a senbon that had been especially deep inside his back. "Oww…”

"This…sucks…” Chōko complained before throwing a senbon she had finished pulling out of her arm at a random mirror. She made a face when she saw Haku catch it before it hit the mirror. "I'm
starting to regret calling you gorgeous!"

"Really?" Sasuke looked questioningly at Chōko.

"Not really..." Chōko's face heated up.

Naruto sighed. "Only you..."

"Watch out!" Sasuke pushed them out of the way of Haku's senbon again. Unlike last time, a few senbon had managed to lodge themselves into his skin. There were two in his right leg, another in his left arm, and one in his wrist.

Each time Sasuke continued to push them out of the way, more and more senbon collected themselves on his body. Soon, he was starting to resemble a human pincushion and then—

"Sasuke!" Chōko shrieked.

Sasuke didn't make a sound when a number of senbon pierced his throat. He stood still for a moment before collapsing onto the ground. Naruto swallowed hard and checked his friend's pulse.

When he felt nothing, Naruto felt as though something had just snapped inside of him. Haku had killed Sasuke...

"He died protecting those important to him," Haku remarked. "He is definitely a shinobi that deserves respect."

"Shut up..." Naruto didn't want to hear it. He felt his eyes beginning to well up with tears as he held Sasuke's body close to his.

Chōko had been oddly calm, but that was probably because she didn't know how to react. She had always been like that. When Shisui had died, Shikamaru had said that she didn't cry until after he had started crying.

"He's not dead...not dead...not dead...not dead..." When Naruto heard Chōko repeat that to herself, he knew she had to be in denial. She was struggling to keep her composure as she pulled out the senbon in Sasuke's body. "Not dead...not dead...not dead..."

"Is this your first death of a friend?" Haku asked innocently. "This is the way of the shinobi, you know—"

"Shut up!" Naruto did not want to hear it. He wouldn't forgive Haku...he couldn't—not anymore. "I'LL KILL YOU!"

The anger Naruto felt was unimaginable. Everything around him was no longer of any interest to him, as all he cared about was getting back at Haku. Every movement Haku made, Naruto could see it all so clearly. He didn't know how—he just did it. It was as though he had been acting only on instinct.

Naruto had no idea how long he was following after Haku. All Naruto could really recall was grabbing onto Haku's leg before punching the boy really hard in the face. It was enough to send Haku crashing through a mirror.

SMASH!

Naruto had to take a moment after that to catch his breath. He clenched his teeth when he noticed
that Haku was still able to stand up. Growling, Naruto dashed forward, his right hand tightened into a fist. Just as he was about ready to deliver another punch to Haku's face, something stopped him.

When Naruto had punched Haku earlier, it had been enough to break his mask. Without the mask, Naruto was unable to bring himself to hurt Haku, because all he could see was the boy who had acted so nicely to him. It had been so much easier when the mask had been on…

"Why did you stop?" Even Haku wanted to know. "I killed your friend, yet you can't kill—"

Haku never had a chance to finish his sentence as a couple of senbon pierced his throat. His eyes widened, his body staggered before he suddenly collapsed.

"What just happened?" Naruto was at a loss for words. He swallowed hard and brought himself to walk over to Haku's body. He made a face when he noticed the senbon piercing through the boy's neck. "How…?"

Naruto looked over his shoulder at Chōko, who was not wearing her glasses and was currently armed with senbon.

"I'm gonna also take my senbon… I know I'm not that experienced with them, but I still want to take them with me—just in case."

"Ch-Chōko-chan…?" Naruto found himself calling out to his friend. "What…did you do-ttebayo?"

Chōko said nothing and instead, stood up. She then slowly made her way over to him and Haku. The closer she got to them, the more Naruto was able to see that she was trembling. When she finally made it to them, she knelt down by Haku's side and felt for his pulse.

"Nononononono…nooooo…" Tears started streaming down Chōko's cheeks as she looked at Haku. "I didn't...why...you weren't supposed to die—oh god, what have I done?!"

Seeing Chōko react the way she did when she found out she had killed Haku made Naruto realize why Kakashi had wanted to keep quiet about Gōzu and Meizu… Chōko was nowhere near ready to take anyone's life—she wasn't like Haku, who was able to kill someone so easily.

Thinking of it now, Naruto realized that he was the same… That was why he couldn't hurt Haku when he saw the boy's face. The mask had made it much easier to dehumanize Haku as someone who Naruto needed to kill in order to avenge Sasuke.

Had Naruto actually gone through with his intent to kill Haku, he most likely would have regretted it afterwards. And yet, in Chōko's case, she had never intended to kill anyone on purpose. It had all been an accident.

Just like the rabbit…

Just like Gōzu and Meizu…

"I-It's okay, Chōko-chan…you didn't mean to-ttebayo…" Naruto felt his eyes beginning to burn when it finally began to set in that the person who had acted so nice to him was dead. It didn't help that Sasuke, too was dead… "H-He killed Sasuke—it's fine!"

"He's not dead!" Chōko wailed. "Haku used the same technique on Sasuke that he used on Zabuza, you idiot!"

Chōko's words were like a slap to his face.
"You mean…" Naruto remembered the words Chōko had been repeating to herself. "He's alive-ttebayo?"

Chōko sniffed and nodded her head. "I…remember how those senbon looked like when they were in Zabuza's neck, and when I saw that it was the same with Sasuke—even though there's more in his neck—I just knew that Haku was lying…"

"A-Are you sure you didn't do the same to Haku-ttebayo?" Naruto noticed that the senbon were right in Haku's neck, so what if…?

"I don't even know if I did it right!" Chōko sobbed. "I just threw the stupid things and hoped it went in right, but…then I realized that Haku's neck was covered up, so…"

"Ah…aaaahhh…" Naruto felt as though something had gotten stuck in his throat.

"S-S-Seeeniiiiiiiii!" Chōko cried out.

Naruto had never expected Kakashi to appear by their side so fast. Kakashi seemed so concerned and just knowing he was there, made Naruto start crying with Chōko. Then Zabuza appeared out of the mist, about ready to attack Kakashi until he noticed Haku.

Seeing Haku's lifeless body seemed to have quite the effect on everyone, even though they had all been fighting earlier. Naruto had no idea how long they had been there, just looking at Haku. All he knew was that everyone had looked away when that man came.

Gatou had appeared and he wasn't alone. There were at least fifty men—maybe even more. All of them were armed and standing behind Gatou, just watching as they waited.

"Gatou…" Zabuza narrowed his eyes. "Why are you here…? And what's with all of these men?!"

Gatou chuckled. "The plan has changed…well, actually, I planned to do this from the beginning. Zabuza, I'm going to have you killed here."

"What?" Zabuza tightened his hold on his sword's hilt.

"I never planned on paying you any money." Gatou smirked.

Naruto was honestly amazed at how calm Zabuza had stayed when he had heard this.

"Hiring normal ninja from the village is expensive and they may betray me…" Gatou explained. "So I get you missing-nin who are easy to take care of afterwards. I have the ninjas battle each other and once they're weakened, I kill them off with numbers. It doesn't cost me anything…a good plan, don't you think?"

Naruto had heard how bad of a man Gatou was, but seeing and hearing him in action was an entirely different thing. This man was scum…

"The only problem in the plan was you, Zabuza…" Gatou sneered. "Demon of the Hidden Mist? What a joke—you're just a cute little baby devil, if you asked me."

Naruto knew then and there that Gatou was a dead man. Saying something like that to a missing-nin like Zabuza was a death wish… And right after seeing Haku dead? Naruto could tell that Zabuza cared for Haku immensely.

Why else would Zabuza had given Haku that ribbon?
"Kakashi, I'm sorry…" Zabuza finally spoke. "This fight is over. Now that I have no reason to go to after Tazuna, I have no reason to fight you."

They were lucky…really lucky, because no one had been there to guard Tazuna, since Sasuke's shadow clone had dispelled when Haku had put him in a state of momentary death.

"Oh yeah…" Gatou suddenly started walking toward them. He stopped once he was standing in front of Haku's body, using his foot to check if the boy truly was dead. "I owe this one…you squeezed my arm until it broke. Heh, and now you're dead."

Without any remorse, Gatou kicked Haku right in the face. Naruto felt his blood beginning and was about ready to attack Gatou when Chōko suddenly lunged at the man and plunged a senbon right into his stomach.

"Gah, you little bitch!" Gatou backed away from Chōko, clutching his stomach as he did.

"Don't fucking touch him…" Naruto had never once seen Chōko use the Killing Intent until now. She was pissed, the Killing Intent practically radiating off her body as she glared at Gatou.

It was honestly a frightening experience, seeing someone as nice as Chōko, just looking at someone like that. It wasn't that much of a surprise that Gatou retreated to the safety of his men.

"Calm down, Chōko…" Kakashi had to grab Chōko to prevent her from throwing anymore senbon at Gatou as he ran. "Don't get yourself into something you can't handle."

"Let me do it, instead…" Zabuza said as he lifted his sword. "You know, when Haku squeezed your hand like that, he did you a favor. If he hadn't done that, I would have killed you then and there. And now that Haku isn't here to keep you alive anymore…you're as good as dead."

It had happened so fast. One minute, Zabuza was with them, the next…he was standing in front of Gatou. Zabuza showed no mercy when he swung his sword.

Naruto found himself closing his eye, even though he had saw Zabuza decapitate Gatou and the men that had been around the scummy bastard. It was honestly something Naruto had never wished to witness, but, for some reason, he didn't really let it bother him that much.

Because Gatou, the biggest bastard to ever live, was dead, meaning the Land of Waves was finally free. Though, now they had all of his men to worry about. With Gatou dead, they no longer had any source of income. For that reason alone, they felt the need to pillage and steal everything Wave had to offer. However, before any of them could even take a step forward, an arrow shot forward and landed right in front of them.

When Naruto turned to look back, he felt his heart practically skip a beat. Standing at the front of an enormous group of people was Inari, armed with a crossbow. Naruto could see a couple of his clones standing by Inari's side. They looked at him and grinned before dispelling themselves.

"Inari…" Naruto was amazed. Somehow, the little boy had managed to round up so many people to fight back.

"If you come any further onto our island…the citizens of this country will stop you with everything we've got!" Inari cocked his crossbow, his expression completely serious until his gaze fell upon Naruto. Upon seeing him, Inari smiled. "A hero shows up at the last second, right?"

Naruto honestly wondered what went on in his mind for his clones to act the way they did. Seeing it happen from a different perspective was honestly much different from when he did it himself. Still,
Naruto couldn't help but smile at what Inari had said.

"That's right, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaimed.

From there, all it took was for Naruto and Kakashi to make multiple shadow clones of themselves, a couple of throws of senbon from Chōko, and Zabuza venting out his anger on Gatou's men for them to retreat.

Once they were gone, the people of Wave needed a moment for it to set in. Afterwards, they all dropped their weapons and started cheering. Even though the people of Wave didn't do much, the fact still stood that they were ready to protect their home at any costs.

And when Naruto saw Sasuke sitting up after staying down for so long in a death-like state, he ran to the Uchiha's side. He was crying when he wrapped his arms around Sasuke in a hug that was probably hurting the Uchiha, but Naruto didn't care, because…Sasuke really was alive.

"It'd take…more than that to kill me." Sasuke was as cocky as ever…

"That is so…you!" Naruto laughed.

"What happened…while I was out?" Sasuke had probably noticed all the people Inari had rounded up. "Wait…why is Zabuza not fighting?"

Naruto made a face when he realized he had a lot of explaining to do. He wasn't good at this sort of stuff… Where was he even going to begin?

"Z-Zabuza-sama…?"

Naruto's eyes widened. He turned his head and quickly found himself watching Zabuza as he helped Haku sit up. Haku was still alive…

"He's alive-ttebayo…” Naruto couldn't believe it.

And it seemed Chōko couldn't either. It must have been a huge relief for her to know that she hadn't killed Haku. For Chōko's inexperienced throw to have hit the correct place to induce a state of momentary death on Haku was just completely lucky. And yet, Chōko didn't seem to care when she watched Zabuza gently remove the senbon from Haku's neck. She latched onto Haku right after that, crying as she apologized for nearly killing him.

"Okay…what happened?" Sasuke asked again.

Naruto thought for a moment and decided to start out with something simple. "Gatou's dead-ttebayo!"

It wasn't much, but it was definitely a start.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit, look at this gloriously long chapter! And all of it was in Naruto’s POV! Holy crap, I never knew how easy it was to write it from his perspective! And yeah, to those who managed to guess that Chōko killed Gōzu and Meizu, that is exactly what had happened.
As for why Zabuza had taken an interest in her... he wanted a trophy in the form of her braid and there had been a change in plan when he realized how much potential Chōko had. Again, this all stems from the fact that she had killed Gōzu and Meizu (by accident, but Chōko doesn't even know about that). Still doesn't make him seem less like a creeper, since he pretty much came off as that.

So yeah, Chōko’s got two kills already, but she doesn’t know that. And considering her reaction to when she thought she had killed Haku, she definitely doesn’t need to know — not yet, at least. She really isn’t ready to take on the responsibility of take the life of others. Neither are Naruto and Sasuke. This was a point that Kakashi had made in canon.

Also, Chōko should not be allowed to use senbon on people just yet. She got extremely lucky that she hit the right place when she threw her senbon at Haku. It doesn’t really help that she wouldn’t know whether or not she did it correctly until after Haku recovered from his momentary state of death. Not exactly a fun time to be her.

And it is absolutely official! All of Team Spiky Hair knows the Oiroke no Jutsu! Kudos to those who caught the reference Chōko was making when she had her version wear a tiger-striped bikini! And most people should have an idea of what Chōko was referencing when she made that comment about flat-chests. By the by, in case anyone should know, Chōko knows a lot of tropes when it comes to fanservice.

The same applies to me, as anyone who’s read the Marukyu Striptease part of Façade has found out. And in case anyone is wondering, konpeitō is this Japanese sugar candy. They’re also known as star bits.

So like the other day at my university, there were these therapy dogs that were brought in as stress-relievers because of finals... You know something is up when a university brings in the therapy dogs. Freaking finals, man... already finished one, the video done getting edited, and I just need to finish that fucking website! I’m almost free!

So I hope you enjoyed this super long chapter. I sure had fun writing it and that about wraps up the Wave arc, as well as pretty much confirms that Zabuza and Haku are alive — another deviation in the works. Let me just say, there will be more to come now that these two have managed to survive the arc. So until next time, everyone!
Strays

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were a lot of things going through my head when Zabuza stuck around with us while both Haku and Sasuke recovered from the state of momentary death the two had been put through. For one thing, Haku and Zabuza were alive and I honestly couldn't help but feel absolutely ecstatic about that—even since I'm pretty relieved that I did not kill Haku.

I am never doing that again until I know what I'm doing with senbon… Still, it was thanks to my stupidly risky throw and the freak-out that occurred afterwards that had caused the outcome of this battle to result in Haku and Zabuza living to see another day. My emotional stability may have taken a huge hit from this experience, but for what it was worth, it wasn't too bad.

Bring on the nightmares!

I mean, Gatou's dead…could have done without seeing Zabuza decapitate the scummy bastard, but I'm not complaining. The bastard deserved it for what he did to Haku—I am way too emotionally invested in this guy. Probably didn't help that Haku decided to fill us in on his background while we were getting well acquainted with the people we had originally been fighting before Gatou bit off more than he could chew and learned the hard way about what happened when he fucked with missing-nin from Kirigakure. That is to say, that one never lived to see another day.

It was rather weird, though, just seeing Zabuza act so calm and collected within our presence at Tazuna's house. In fact, he and Kakashi were getting along quite well…in a somewhat vitriolic sense. Zabuza certainly liked messing with Inari, who made it a bit of a game to try and sneak up on Zabuza without him noticing.

Being who he was, Zabuza could always tell when Inari was sneaking up on him…he just liked to play along with the kid. It was honestly cute—which is a word I would never use to describe Zabuza. I had to remind myself that he had a hand in raising Haku, which sort of explained the way he acted, but not too much.

I guess it was just easy to say that Zabuza mellowed out considerably when it was revealed that Haku wasn't dead. Haku certainly seemed to reflect Zabuza's change in demeanor through the way he was polite and friendly towards us, without showing any hesitance—even when Zabuza had said he was soft.

The construction of the bridge continued without any setbacks the day after Gatou's life came to an end. A couple of days had passed before Zabuza had brought it to our attention that he still had some unfinished business in regards to Gatou, even though he was pretty dead.

It turned out that the reason why Gatou had gotten so desperate to hire a missing-nin like Zabuza and the Demon Brothers was that he had grown too comfortable with his hold over the country of Wave and ended up situating his main base here. And considering how cocky Gatou had gotten, he had allowed Zabuza and Haku into his base without so much of a second thought to how horribly it could backfire on him. And boy did it backfire on the bastard!

Zabuza had ended up dragging Kakashi, Naruto, and I into a plan to raid Gatou's base. We were going to go through every little thing that was in that bastard's base and take every single thing that held value of some sort. It sounded like a simple idea, and Kakashi seemed willing to go along with
it—but only because Naruto asked him persistently if they could go.

So while Haku and Sasuke were left behind at Tazuna's house, the rest of us left to go on a raid. Gatou's base, in general, was huuuge. It was also quite secluded…and still full of Gatou's men, who were squabbling over who got what, now that he was dead. They were quite quick to flee upon seeing Zabuza, who had left quite the impression on them.

It was shortly right after Gatou's men had fled, in which Naruto had created a bunch of clones to help speed up our investigation of the area, that we came across something I thought I'd never do. Freeing many girls who had been forced to sell themselves when their families could no longer pay off the high taxes Gatou had imposed on the people of Wave was just that. It was just…oh god, like what the hell?!

Some of those girls couldn't have been any younger than fourteen…I have never been so happy to see someone dead after that—especially since some of the girls weren't treated so nicely, as shown by the bruises and scars that covered their bodies.

Naruto had created a bunch of shadow clones to help escort the girls back to their homes, with Kakashi making a shadow clone of his own to lead the clones. Shortly after they had left, Kakashi had ruffled my hair and told me everything would be okay.

I'm not sure if he did that because he had noticed how disturbed I was to see those girls or because I was a girl—or maybe even both, but it did honestly make me feel better. Kunoichi classes never dealt with this sort of shit.

I mean—prostitution was a topic that was covered, so I'm not that unfamiliar with it. Konohagakure does have its own Red Light District with many brothels, of which are home to many oiran of differing rank and the average non-oiran sex worker. Though, that was just it…these girls weren't sex workers—there was nothing for them to gain through this, aside from humiliation and shame, and considering how some of these girls looked, even more than that.

They didn't have a choice at all...

It's just—we never heard of the dark side of the profession and just seeing it this way is really sobering. It didn't help that what happened afterwards was just as sobering.

Gatou was breeding exotic animals—animals that weren't even native to Wave or the countries around it. And when we first came across the scene, it was pretty bloody and full of dead animal corpses—specifically, fox corpses. A couple of Naruto clones were beating up some left over thugs who were the cause of death for the foxes.

Luckily, there were still many foxes left over, but unfortunately, the foxes who were killed turned out to be mothers, and…well…

"Kakashi-sensei, I can't leave them-ttebayo!" Naruto whined as he held a basket full of mewling fox kits close to his chest.

"Well, I don't think we'll be capable of handling nine fox kits." Kakashi was trying to be reasonable—and he was—but it was really difficult when pathos was involved at maximum power. Deep down, I think Kakashi really wanted to allow Naruto to keep them, but since Naruto is currently jinchuuriki and housing Kurama, a nine-tailed demon fox…the irony didn't seem to be welcomed.

"But Kakashi!!" Naruto looked at Kakashi with wide-eyes that were glistening with tears. He showed Kakashi the fox kits and all it took was a minute before Kakashi turned away and sighed.
"You can take care of them until we leave Wave…" Kakashi knew when he was defeated.

"Yaaay!" Naruto was so happy that I had to stop him from spinning around because he was still holding the basket and I doubt the baby kits would appreciate being spun around.

"You're way too soft on your brats," Zabuza told Kakashi.

"I'm sorry, but are you their Jounin?" Kakashi narrowed his right eye at Zabuza. "Didn't think so."

Wow, Kakashi can certainly be snarky when he wants to be.

"So are we going to continue this raid or what?" Even though I would rather fawn over the cuteness of the fluff balls in Naruto's possession, I want to free these poor animals from their cages. "These animals aren't going to free themselves."

"Small problem with that—since these animals aren't native to Wave, we can't exactly free them without that causing any problems," Kakashi explained. "I have to send a messenger to Konoha to have them all put in Training Ground Zero."

"Training Ground Zero?" How many training grounds do we even have in Konoha? "What's that?"

"You see all of these animals?" Kakashi gestured at the many animals in cages. "This is why we have Training Ground Zero—for exotic animals."

I did not know that… "You learn something new every day…"

"Hey, these little things aren't opening their eyes-tesyboo!" Naruto suddenly brought up. "Does that mean they're asleep, or…?"

"Naruto, they're crying, I doubt they're asleep, so…" Wait a second… "If they're not asleep, then…"

Oh fuck—these things aren't even nine days old!

"Sensei…" I don't like this one bit… "I think we need to leave…can we come back later? Preferably, when we have more people with us?"

And when these freaking fox kits aren't crying? Oh god, I think they're hungry…

"I doubt four people will be enough to take everything Gatou has…" Maybe we should wait until Haku and Sasuke recover. "And Zabuza did mention Gatou had a treasury, so…"

Come on—take the bait!

"We'll leave once we make sure the entire place is cleared of Gatou's men." Thank you, Kakashi!

…

…

When we returned to Tazuna's house, I found myself helping Naruto and the others bottle-feed the fox kits we brought home with us. It was a rather tedious thing to do, but I wasn't that annoyed. In fact, I was inwardly squealing as I bottle-fed the white ball of fluff I held in my hand. I think this one might be an albino…

Inari certainly seemed rather into this, as was his mother and grandfather, who decided to help us out (thank god). Haku and Sasuke were also helping, since they were at least able to do something as
simple as bottle-feeding. Then there was *this* guy…

"You tell anyone I did this, and I will kill you." Did I ever mention that Zabuza also was helping? There was just something about a dangerous missing-nin bottle-feeding a fox kit that I found oddly adorable.

It was certainly enough for Kakashi to risk taking a picture of the scene in secret…you know, for blackmail. This is seriously something I can't honestly believe this is happening. Then again—I never expected Zabuza and Haku to make it out of this entire scenario alive. I'm glad they're alive…their deaths really shook me up in the manga. They're two characters that I thought deserved to live.

However, there is something that's bugging me right now and that's what exactly is going to happen to them after we leave Wave?

"So what are you two going to do after we leave?" I found myself asking.

"Avoiding hunter-nin, as usual," Zabuza replied. "It's only a matter of time before Kirigakure hears of our whereabouts and come after us."

"Thankfully, news takes a while to reach Kirigakure," Haku remarked. "So we have some time before we have to leave."

"That doesn't sound fun-ttebayo…" Naruto made a face. "Hey…why don't you come with us?"

*Knucklehead say what?*

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "Naruto, do you have any idea how much trouble those two will cause us if we bring them back to Konoha with us?"

"That is seriously putting us at risk with Kirigakure." Kakashi looked nervously at us. "The Sandaime has only just managed to make contact after years of a lacking response from their Mizukage. He is in the middle of forging an alliance."

"One that could possibly fall apart if they find out we are housing one of their missing-nin…"

Sasuke's expression was serious, which was hilarious in the sense that he was wearing that expression while feeding a fox kit.

"Is that what goes on in those hidden villages of yours?" Tazuna asked a question that was rather appropriate coming from a civilian like him.

"But he helped this country!" Inari did not seem to be liking what he was hearing. "Can't something be done?"

"Sensei…?" Tsunami looked questioningly at Kakashi.

Kakashi sighed. "For a shinobi to leave their village is a crime considered punishable by death. The only way to overturn something as such is to request for a pardon from whoever is in charge of that village."

"For Kirigakure, that would be the Mizukage," Haku explained. "And Zabuza-sama is not exactly on good terms with the Mizukage."

"Turns out assassination attempts and coups d'état aren't taken rather well when done against the Mizukage." Zabuza had one weird sense of humor, trying to play something so serious as though it wasn't serious. "I doubt Yagura would even consider trying to pardon me after what I have done."
"Isn't Yagura the Yondaime Mizukage?" Kakashi arched his brow at Zabuza.

"That's him—he wouldn't look it at first due to how short and young he looks, though." Zabuza chuckled. "You wouldn't believe how many times he got mistaken for a child..."

"You act as though you know him..." A little too well, if you ask me.

"I knew him back before he became Mizukage, if that's what you mean." Okay, this is certainly treading stuff that wasn't in the *Naruto* wiki. "Enough to know that something was up when he was Mizukage, though what's it to ya?"

"The Yondaime stepped down at the beginning of this year due to health reasons, so Kirigakure is now under the rule of the Godaime Mizukage," Kakashi explained. "Terumī Mei is her name, in case you're wondering."

"Holy shit, Mei's Mizukage already?"

"Well I'll be damned." Zabuza sounded rather surprised. "She actually managed to become Mizukage."

"Heeey, since Yagura isn't the Mizukage anymore, do you think the Godaime will pardon Zabuza?!" Naruto seemed rather eager to bring Zabuza and Haku back with us. "Can Zabuza and Haku change villages or something-ttebayo?"

Is there something like that? "Sensei?"

"Well...it'll take a lot of paperwork and political involvement, but...it is possible," Kakashi replied. "A pardon is still required before anything, if these two wish to change their citizenship so that they are now with Konohagakure."

"Hey, Haku...you say that your kekkei genkai made you unwanted in Kirigakure, right?" Kirigakure was infamous for its bloodline purges. "Konohagakure protects anyone with kekkei genkai."

"Two of our Noble Clans are those with kekkei genkai," Sasuke added. "That includes me, of the Uchiha. The Hyuuga are the other, and if you need any help, Chōko's family can pitch in to help as they're another of our Noble Clans."

"Just what clan are you from?" Zabuza suddenly asked me.

I blinked a few times and nodded my head. "I'm from the Akimichi clan...my name is Akimichi Chōko, in case you're wondering."

Zabuza certainly seemed surprised to hear that, though it was probably because I appeared different from what those of my namesake usually possessed.

"Part of the reason why it would have been a bad idea to take her off my hands is that her family would have been after your ass," Kakashi explained. "Not only is she an Akimichi, but she is the daughter of the current head of the clan."

"And the last missing-nin that tried to do something to me ended up on my father's kill list," I added. "Fun fact: My father didn't have a kill list until after a certain snake bastard tried to kill me."

"Snake bastard...?" Haku repeated questioningly.

"I'll give you a hint...he's a Sannin," Kakashi remarked. "And our little glasses-wearing girl, here,
punched him in the crotch when she was eight."

He sounded so proud…as though he was happy to know that I was capable of such impulses as an eight-year-old.

"That's *not* something you should be proud of!" Goddammit, Kakashi, stop making my life difficult!

Of course, after Kakashi had said this, Zabuza was now looking at me with as though he had hit the jackpot. Fortunately, Kakashi put an end to it by saying that I was still off limits.

…

About a few minutes later, we put all the fox kits back into the basket, as we were finish feeding them. Everyone, or that is, the adults, had gone downstairs, leaving the rest of us in the guest room with the kits. Kakashi and Zabuza said they were going to be discussing things in regards to what Naruto had brought up. I'm guessing Kakashi is actually considering on going through Naruto's suggestion…

As for the fox kits and us—they should have fallen asleep right after we had fed them, but they didn't. Instead, they were crying…rather loudly, and it was to the point Naruto was growing frustrated because he didn't know what to do. Inari tried to help as much as he could, while Haku and Sasuke did the same, but to no avail. I'm guessing these kits just wanted their mothers…

What's even sadder is that these kits had siblings of their own that Naruto's clones were unable to save, just like their mothers…

"Chōko-chan, do something, please?" Naruto looked at me with those eyes of his that made me unable to say no.

I looked at the crying fox kits and sighed. These things were just so pitiful and helpless that my conscious couldn't just let me ignore them. "Okay, I'll try to see what I can do."

I'm not exactly a fox whisperer or anything, but dammit—I'm gonna at least try my best to get these little things to stop crying! Their cries are seriously making my chest hurt…

"The joy I felt when I touched you,
Went deep, deep down,
And seeped into
Every nook and cranny of this body."

Back when we were at the orphanage, we sometimes found ourselves caring for the infants there. It didn't take too long for all of us to learn that some of these infants preferred to be lulled to sleep via song. And when it came to songs, the boys usually looked at me since kunoichi classes made me the viable source for knowing about songs and how to sing them. It also helped that my past life had an obsession with music and songs.

"Even if I'm far away,
And no longer understand anything,
Even when the time comes
For this life to end."
Sometimes, the other orphans would be there to watch us care for the infants. Naptime was a huge deal for the children who were five years old and under. To some of the children, they wanted the same treatment as the infants and wished to hear the same song I had used. Those very same children also happened to have the luck of knowing how it once felt to have parents and seeing someone sing children to sleep reminded them of when their parents were still alive and with them.

"Everything of now,
Is everything of the past.
We'll meet again, I'm sure,
In some nostalgic place."

I still question my past life's priorities when it came to memorizing things that are completely irrelevant to the knowledge that I should have possessed for this world when I was reincarnated. And yet, seeing some of the irrelevant things I have come to learn and memorize helping others in some way makes it worth it.

"The warmth you gave me,
Deep, deep down,
Comes to me, now complete,
From a time long past."

I'm starting to notice how much quieter the kits are starting to get. They're still crying, but not as loud, meaning that my singing is actually working. So it wasn't a waste...

"Steadily in my heart,
The flames of passion give light.
And softly soothe my pain,
Down to the depths of my grief."

It's rather ironic how much I can relate to this song in some way, considering the origin of where I heard it—that being a movie trailer for a Studio Ghibli movie about a certain Japanese folklore. The folklore was about a bamboo cutter and the baby he found growing inside a glowing bamboo plant. What's even more ironic about it is that, from what I could remember, in this world, the very same folklore has a place in the form of a certain woman who shares her name with the child the bamboo cutter and his wife raised in the tale.

Kaguya-hime, or Princess Kaguya, was her name. And I am quite sure from what little I know about Ōtsutsuki Kaguya, she is a reference to the Kaguya from the same tale.

"Everything now,
Is hope for the future.
I'll remember, I'm sure,
With memories of life."
Silence is what I heard after I finished singing. The kits were fast asleep, as was Inari, who was curled up on Sasuke's futon. Naruto was relieved, as was Sasuke, and Haku seemed stunned.

"You have a lovely voice," Haku said before smiling at me.

I felt my cheeks heating up a bit, if only because I got complimented by an attractive person. It was Himawari all over again, except Haku was a boy who was closer to my age…

"How old are you?" I found myself asking Haku.

"I recently turned fifteen at the beginning of this year!" Haku replied. "What about you?"

"I turn thirteen next month…" Holy shit, I'm getting old…

Haku nodded his head. "Ah, so you aren't that much younger than I am…"

Why does that seem like a good thing to you? Eh, I'm guessing Haku hasn't been around anyone his age for a while until now… Okay, there is something I've been meaning to ask, and I should do that right now.

"Can I have my ribbon back?" Not saying you look bad with it or anything, but I just want my ribbon back.

Haku blinked and smiled sweetly at me. "No."

"What do you mean no?" I narrowed my eyes at the androgynous-looking male.

"Zabuza-sama gave it to me," Haku replied as though it were obvious. "That is why I cannot part with it…"

"But it belongs to me…" Come on!

"I apologize, but I just cannot part with it, Chōko-san." Haku looked sympathetically at me. "How about I get you something to replace it?"

I puffed up my cheeks in annoyance. "No…how about I do that instead?"

Haku blinked. "Hmm?"

"It's my ribbon, so I should be the one to replace it with something of equal value…" Assuming I'll be able to even do something like that. "What do you think of another ribbon?"

Haku tilted his head to the side as he tugged lightly on the ribbon tied around his bun. "Hmm…I'll consider it."

"Okay!" I grinned. "I'll get you a ribbon that'll make you look even prettier! What do you say?"

"I think…I would like that." Haku smiled again.

I nodded my head and then turned to Naruto, who was currently watching the sleeping fox kits. He just seemed so enthralled with their existence. Sasuke, on the other hand, when I looked at him, seemed rather concerned.

"What's up with you, Sasuke?" I asked him.

"Kakashi said that Naruto could take care of them only until we leave Wave," Sasuke responded.
"I'm worried about how attached he will get to those."

Oh right, shit… "Well, I'm sure he won't get too attached!"

*Ahahhaa, yeah—no, he's definitely going to get attached.*

"Hey, what are we going to name them-ttebayo?" Did I say definitely? I meant affirmatively.

*Kakashi is so screwed...*

... ...

For the next few days, apart from having to care for nine fox kits, Zabuza and Kakashi had to leave Tazuna's house every once in a while to check up on the animals back in Gatou's base. Kakashi was making a list of the animals that were there for reference for the message he was going to send back to Konoha, in which Tazuna was able to confirm that some of the animals used to be native to Wave, but have died out.

Wolves, were some of those animals, as we found out through Tazuna, who told us, "There used to be wolves in Wave."

It was a rather sobering comment. I mean, extinction of species in an area was enough to make me quiet for quite a while. Certain types of birds were amongst those, such as cranes, seagulls (which is oddly weird, considering the location of this country), and hawks.

And, while they might have not been native to Wave, snakes had been found amongst the animals and I just shuddered at the thought that I nearly encountered one while we were there. Ugh, freaking snakes...

Kakashi was also able to confirm that Gatou's base also possessed rare plants and trees not native to Wave. It was just a huge menagerie of animals and plants. Whatever wasn't native to the Land of Waves was going to be taken back to Training Ground Zero in Konoha. As for the rest, Tsunami suggested of turning Gatou's base into an animal sanctuary of sorts, which was a rather good idea.

"And since Sasuke and Haku are almost at full strength, I think tomorrow we'll be able to properly continue our raid," Kakashi continued. "So be prepared for tomorrow."

That meant going directly to sleep after dinner, which we were currently eating at the table.

"We'll watch over the kits while you're gone," Tsunami assured Naruto. "So don't worry."

Naruto still wasn't that sure, but then Zabuza started talking about the treasury he and Kakashi had the luck of investigating.

"There are quite of lot of valuable items there, including some scrolls that might catch your interests, speaking of which…" Zabuza walked over to Haku, who had been eating with the rest of us. "I got you a birthday present."

"But…it isn't my birthday," Haku remarked.

"It is today…for me," Zabuza said as he handed Haku a scroll. "Try not to look into it until you fully recover your strength. It's a summoning scroll that I thought you would like."
The look of gratitude on Haku's face was so immense that I thought he was going to cry. A small blush tinged his cheeks as he accepted the scroll and held it close to his chest. "Th-Thank you so much, Zabuza-sama!"

It was honestly touching to see how much Zabuza truly cared for Haku. It just proved how much of a cover the whole mindset about tools and whatnot was to Zabuza to hide his true feelings. I'm honestly glad they're still alive…

That night, Kakashi sent one of his ninken to deliver a message to Konohagakure. We should get a response back within three days, depending how it all went. After which, we would learn of what was going to happen to Zabuza and Haku. Hopefully, it isn't anything too bad.

…

…

The next day, we had a rather rude awakening in the form of Zabuza dumping a bucket of water over all of us, except Kakashi and Haku. I nearly threw a kunai at Zabuza for that, but Haku stopped me. He wasn't exactly keen on anyone hurting Zabuza. Though, compared to what Haku had done to Gatou, he was rather gentle with me when he grabbed my hand.

It still scared the crap out of me, but it was better than having a broken wrist like Gatou… And a broken wrist to someone who usually relies on shurikenjutsu and taijutsu just meant bad times.

Right after Naruto, Sasuke, and I changed out of our wet clothes, the three of us, Kakashi, Zabuza, and Haku left Tazuna's house. The raid was on and we were all ready to take as much as we can with us, as whatever was left over was going to go to the people of Wave. Surprisingly, it was Zabuza who had made that suggestion.

Zabuza, despite all what he did, was not someone without morals. The one thing he hated most was corruption and considering what Gatou did to the Land of Waves, Zabuza wanted to give the country a good start in their recovery.

…

…

"Wh-Whoa…" I felt my eyes practically bulge when I saw what was beyond the doors Kakashi and Zabuza had pushed open. There was just so much gold, silver, and jewels…it was honestly overwhelming. The poor college girl in me just wanted to outright cry at the sight of this. It was so beautiful…

Then Sasuke saw the scrolls and ran over to them, yelling, "Dibs on Raiton!"

Naruto, Haku, and I were quick to follow after Sasuke, since, while treasures are lovely and everything, new techniques were much more valuable and useful to us. Though, that's not to say that I still wasn't going to claw anyone's eyes out if they grabbed something I wanted that was shiny and pretty…because I would.

I like pretty things…especially if they were shiny.

"All of these Fūton jutsu…" Naruto looked at the many scrolls he held in his arms.

Kakashi just took one look at them and said, "Naruto, those could be stolen Sunagakure property."
"…Still mine-ttebayo," Naruto said as he stuffed them down his backpack.

There was a lot of stuffing of scrolls within our backpacks—well, everyone's but mine. Haku managed to find a couple of scrolls containing Hyōton techniques. He was honestly pleased, considering his kekkei genkai. As for me, I was looking for scrolls containing Suiton jutsu, but couldn't find any, surprisingly…

"Sensei, where are all of the Suiton?" I asked Kakashi.

Kakashi gestured at Zabuza. "Ask him."

"I already laid claim to them the other day," Zabuza said unabashedly with an expression that made it look like he was grinning under those bandages of his. Of course the missing-nin from Kirigakure would have hogged all of the Water Release scrolls! "Though, Haku will be willing to share them with you."

"No," Kakashi was quick to say, with a firm tone before telling me to go on ahead with looking elsewhere.

I blinked a few times and just decided to start going through the gold, silver, and jewelry—though, not before checking out a couple of more scrolls that were available. Since I couldn't find any Suiton jutsu scrolls, I decided to look for the next thing that caught my eyes: summoning scrolls.

Unfortunately, there weren't much around, only like two, but I was willing to take with what I could find. I'll probably just give them as a gift to one of my friends, since I'd rather go with a summon that was more avian than a flying mammal, like a bat (even though I adore bats), or a crustacean, like a crab. I seriously wonder what it was that Zabuza had given Haku…

That was before my attention turned back to the piles of treasure littering the floors of the room. There were so many pretty things and I wanted it all. Within the next few minutes, I could be found digging through the piles of jewelry, putting on whatever caught my eye, like a simple silver anklet with a pretty jewel dangling from it or a bracelet…yeah…

     Maybe I should get something for Mama…

"What do you think of this?" Haku nearly scared the crap out of me when he just held out a ring in front of my face.

Once I calmed down, I found myself drawn to the ring Haku was holding in front of my face. It reminded me a lot of my high school class ring from my past life. It had a sleek appearance and consisted of white gold with an emerald on it. I always liked the combination of green and silver, and yet, I considered myself a Gryffindor than Slytherin, despite the fact that my past life's surname had something that will basically never let me forget about the founder of Slytherin.

A bit of irony there, though, considering my current life as Akimichi Chōko leaving me with a crippling fear of snakes. So now I have reasonable reasons to never consider myself fit for Slytherin…ever, like at all.

Nostalgic thoughts aside, I really liked the ring Haku was holding out to me. "Pretty!"

"You can have it!" Haku said, about ready to place it in the palm of my hand.

Of course, then Kakashi dropped by and took the ring out of my hand before I could even place it on my ring finger.
"I'll take that!" is what he said before going on his way. I was rather miffed, but decided to ignore it as I continued to look through what was in front of me. I mean, there was a lot to offer, so I shouldn't be complaining—oh who am I kidding, that ring was mine!

"Sensei, you jerk, that was mine!" I exclaimed. Kakashi ignored me as he placed the ring on his left ring finger and held it up to see how it looked on himself. I'm surprised it could even fit on his finger…then again, I never did check if it could fit on mine, so the fact that it was able to fit on Kakashi's meant…dammit, it could never fit on me!

"Never mind…" I huffed. "I'll find something else that actually fits me…"

I hate it when jewelry doesn't fit me…

Time passed and soon, Naruto joined Haku and I as we continued looking through the treasure pile. Naruto reminded a lot like Abu from Aladdin, like…he grabbed whatever caught his attention and stuffed it down his backpack. He paid very close attention to anything that held a spiral design on it, and when asked about it, he gave a very simple explanation.

"Iruka-sensei told me about a bit about my Uzumaki heritage," he began. "He told me about the clan's symbol, which looked a lot like a spiral or swirl!"

Wow, Iruka, kudos to doing something like that…wait, what?! "How much did he tell you?"

"Hmm…not much, really-ttebayo," Naruto replied. "Iruka-sensei said he was going to tell me more about the clan when I got older! I don't know why, but I can wait!"

I have a feeling it had to do with the destruction of Uzushiogakure and the fact that the surviving members of the Uzumaki clan were basically scattered all over the world. Naruto didn't need to know of something like that just yet. In some ways, he was like Sasuke, having lost his clan through the destruction of its home.

Still, it was nice—just seeing Naruto being so happy to have some knowledge on his clan heritage. And it definitely showed through his obsession with items that held a design similar to that of the Uzumaki clan symbol.

I might have ended up fighting over a few items with Naruto because of this, like…mine! But Naruto did grab it first, but I still wanted it, dammit! It got to the point where Zabuza made a comment about taking it easy, but then Naruto responded by saying, "Why don't you take some to bribe to the Mizukage?"

Zabuza thought for a moment before immediately joining us in our taking of the many treasures in this room. It was honestly a smart idea, considering that Zabuza might have to pay off his fee in accordance to the bounty that was on his head. At least, that's what Kakashi said might happen. It really depends, as missing-nin rarely ever manage to successfully receive a pardon and make it out alive.

And considering how Zabuza knew Mei just as well as Yagura, it might do well to give her some gifts. I'm sure she would appreciate it…
The more time we spent in this room, the more items we discovered. There were also paintings, statues, and even instruments, as well as expensive textiles. There were also weapons as well, though they were more for decoration than for combat. Though, as we continued to search, we actually came upon real weapons and armory. Naruto was absolutely ecstatic about this.

"Look at all this armor and weapons…" Naruto looked about ready to grab some…but Sasuke stopped him.

"Put down the pointy things," Sasuke said in a somewhat stern tone.

Naruto frowned. "But I heard Neji-san's teammate likes this stuff-ttebayo!"

I'm guessing he's talking about Tenten. She would like this sort of stuff.

"Are you trying to woo every girl in Konoha to be in your unofficial harem or something?" Sasuke looked questioningly at Naruto.

The thing about Naruto is that most of the items he had gotten that didn't remind him of his clan's symbol were going to be given to his friends as birthday gifts of some sort. For the most part, the jewelry was for his female friends. He hadn't really moved onto what his male friends would have want just yet, so Sasuke brought up a bit of a point.

Upon hearing Sasuke ask him this, Naruto was quite quick to say, "No."

"Then go easy on what you get," Sasuke calmly said. "Okay?"

Naruto nodded his head. "Okay…"

"To be honest, I think your backpack has reached its limit." It was practically bulging from everything that Naruto had stuffed into it, from scrolls to jewelry, to a few decorative weapons. "Hey, Kakashi-sensei, what do you think?"

Kakashi took one look at Naruto's backpack and said, "Let's get that into a scroll before you get mugged."

I'm honestly amazed that how many sealing scrolls Kakashi had even brought with himself. Like, is there any particular reason he carries that many around with him? Or is it just a force of habit? Truth be told, I always carried an extra empty sealing scroll to store our backpacks to get rid of some deadweight.

Right now, I was using that scroll to store all the jewelry I wanted to keep. I managed to get enough things to hopefully calm my mother down when she found out about what had occurred on our supposed C-rank mission. I might have also snuck in some weaponry…what? I like sharp stuff, too!

I like it especially when it's shiny…I need help.

…

It was the late evening when we finally left Gatou's base. One thing Naruto was quick to do after we had raided the treasury was check on the plants that Kakashi and Zabuza had said they had found there. Naruto might have taken a couple of those with him, most of them being fruit trees and the like, maybe even a few flowering plants.
Oh, and did I ever mention that Gatou also had an aquarium of some sort in his base? His base was located near the water… And the reason I even mentioned this was because Naruto wanted to take the dolphins that we had found there with us…how?

"We are not keeping the dolphins!" Kakashi had been firm with his decision.

And Naruto still tried, saying, "But they're Iruka-sensei's family-ttebayo!"

By that, Naruto was bringing up the fact that Iruka's name meant dolphin.

Kakashi just looked at Naruto for a moment before saying, "No, Naruto."

And that was that. We freed those dolphins by the way… They deserved to be free, dammit! And luckily, for us, considering the location of the base, and where the aquarium was situated at, all it really took was breaking down a gate to allow these beautiful creatures to escape. It was certainly quite a sight to see them swimming off into the distant, as the sun began to set on the horizon.

I am seriously glad that Gatou was dead. Freaking hell, when he wasn't being a bastard to people, he was being a bastard to animals…

Since that day, we stayed mostly at Tazuna's place, with Kakashi and Zabuza going back to Gatou's base to keep an eye on the animals. We still had to take care of the kits, though after a couple days of doing so, it came to our attention that we needed help…like, actual help.

So Kakashi ended up having to ask one of his ninjens, Pakkun, if there were any ninjens that had recently given birth. Turns out, there really was, but in order to bring the mother out, a contract needed to be made because otherwise, she wasn't coming out at all.

"That being said, who is willing to make a contract with the dog summon?" Kakashi looked at all of us after he had made this explanation.

Before anyone could even register what Kakashi was asking for us, Sasuke raised his hand and said, "I'll do it."

And just like that, Sasuke became the first out of Team 7 to make his first summoning contract. And what we got, were two Shiba Inu of the mother-daughter duo type, by the names of Hanī and Miriku.

Hanī was, as her name suggested, a honey-colored female Shiba Inu. Miriku was the pup she had given birth to and, like her mother, was much like her name suggested. Miriku was the color of milk, being an albino Shiba Inu. These two were going to be Sasuke's main ninjens, though that didn't leave him unable to summon Kakashi's ninjens, according to Kakashi himself. That aside, the fact that Hanī was a new mother left her able to nurse some of the fox kits we had on us, making our jobs of feeding them much easier.

Though, there is something I found entirely hilarious out of this scenario, and it's the fact that Sasuke's ninjens are Shiba Inu. Like, holy crap, I can't look at Hanī and Miriku without thinking of that stupid Doge meme. I mean…

Such ninjens.

Much cute.
I should just stab myself with a kunai for even doing that. Still, I like Shiba Inu and Miriku just reminds me so much of Koromaru from *Persona 3*, so I'm pretty happy to see an albino Shiba—especially a puppy. Life seemed to be pretty good after that…except for the fact that Haku still refused to return my ribbon to me. I even tried going to Zabuza for help, but Kakashi kept me away from the missing-nin for reasons he refused to tell me.

…

Eventually, we received a response from the message Kakashi had sent to Konoha, in regards to the exotic animals in Gatou's base and the request for allowing Haku and Zabuza into the village. As soon as Konoha received word of the completion of the bridge, they would send shinobi to fetch the animals. As for Haku and Zabuza, they were allowed into Konoha for the most part. It was just details involving the Mizukage's pardon, which would allow the two to move into the village *officially*, that were still pending.

It *really* did help that Haku had a kekkei genkai, which certainly motivated the council to make a decision. However, as Zabuza was, technically, Haku's guardian, the two could not be separated, so while the council didn't want to add in Zabuza, they had no other choice. And before that could even happen, they needed Mei's blessing in order for them to switch villages.

The Sandaime sure did *not* like the amount of paperwork that was going to come out of this, but for what it was worth, Zabuza and Haku were finally going to have a place to call home. Naruto was completely ecstatic over this thought, while I was just as happy, since I really didn't want to say goodbye to Zabuza and Haku.

I was just worried about them dying, *okay*? It's a *reasonable* concern…

"So when are we going to leave again?" I asked Kakashi, wanting to make sure I knew what was up.

"When the bridge has been completed," Kakashi answered. "According to Tazuna, it's nearly done now."

"That's good to hear," Sasuke remarked. "I'm starting to miss home…"

"Yeah, me too…" Wave is nice and everything, but I miss Konoha and everyone there.

"No matter how many years you've been working as a shinobi, you can never seem to completely smother that feeling of homesickness that torments your heart," Kakashi stated. "And, to be honest, I miss lounging about with you guys in the living room."

That was something we nearly did on a daily basis after coming back from a D-rank mission. It was just something that we fell into routine. It felt weird to break out of it when we accepted this mission and left Konohagakure.

"So you live with your Genin?" Zabuza looked questioningly at Kakashi.

Kakashi coughed into his hand. "I was assigned to watch over Naruto and Sasuke around five years ago. This little girl, on the other hand, keeps forgetting she has a home and stays over far longer than she should."

"Sorry…” I smile sheepishly. You have no idea how *often* I forget to go home…it's gotten to the point where Kakashi just drops everything and takes all of us back to the Akimichi compound in
order to apologize to my parents for borrowing their daughter.

"So you are their guardian?" Haku asked Kakashi.

Kakashi thought about it for a moment and nodded his head. "Yeah, I guess you can say that."

There's just something about hearing Kakashi actually accept something like that instead of denying it… It made me oddly happy.

"Does that mean I can call you Tou-chan-ttebayo?" Naruto asked.

Kakashi smiled at Naruto and firmly said, "No."

\textit{Typical Kakashi.}

\ldots

\ldots

I should have seen this day coming—really, I should have. Hell—I was even talking it over with Kakashi during breakfast!

"Hopefully Naruto knows that if those kits see him, there is no giving them up because of imprinting and all." To be honest, I'm not completely sure if foxes go through imprinting. I was more of a bird person (still am) and happened to be informed about birds, because \textit{birds}.

Anyways, it was shortly after I had said that that Naruto came running down the stairs, loudly exclaiming, "They're opening their eyes!"

\textit{Well...shit.}

"We're doomed." Kakashi face palmed.

Even if foxes didn't go through imprinting, Naruto had gotten so attached to them, that I doubt we could even separate them. Looks like we're keeping the kits and oh man—that's gonna be a lot of paperwork. It was just a standard procedure in regards to bringing in foreign animals.

First Haku and Zabuza, now these little kits, I wonder if it's going to become a habit for us to bring in strays…

Chapter End Notes

So stuff happened and...yeah, I've had it in my head to bring Haku and Zabuza to Konoha. The only difference is that I managed to think up a procedure, because let's face it—things need to happen in order for anyone to get past the fact that Zabuza is a missing-nin. And by that, I mean paperwork, political involvement, and apologies.

Oh, and by the way, there is a Studio Ghibli movie about Kaguya, and it's called the Tale of Princess Kaguya. Made me cry, so do have some tissues on you when you watch the movie because you will cry. The song is called Inochi no Kioku or Memories of Life, and I first heard it in the trailer for the movie. Looking at the lyrics, I do see it fitting Chōko.
In other news, fox kits—you have ChibiFoxAI to thank for that, and the reason for it, is that first, it was just a suggestion on Skype…then it started growing into more until it became part of the plot. Like, these kits are going to be here to stay. I guess you can say that the originality train decided to crash through this fic. Expect to be seeing a lot of references with these foxes, because it’s going to happen—especially when they get named.

Also, a raid on Gatou’s base became a thing…it came to my attention that with Haku and Zabuza alive, they would know where his base would be and considering how desperate Gatou had gotten to hire missing-nin to get rid of Tazuna would mean that said base would have to be very close.

Naruto is somewhat aware of his Uzumaki heritage, not much to make a huge difference, but enough for him to have an idea that he does have a heritage. Oh, and Sasuke has become the first of Team Spiky Hair to make their first summoning contract, and it’s with Kakashi’s ninden.

Say hello to mother-daughter duo Hanī and Miriku! They’ll also be here to stay—expect them to have bigger roles come later chapters. And in case anyone is wondering, Chōko will also make her own summoning contract, just not with the scrolls she has found—even though she is totally considering the bat summon.

That aside, Mei’s Mizukage earlier than expected, so that’s definitely a thing—and in case you’re wondering, you should expect a trip to Kirigakure sometime in the future. It is something that needs to be done, so just keep that in mind.

Also, keep in mind that, despite the way Zabuza has been portrayed in this chapter, he is still who he is, and that is the Demon of Kirigakure. I see him as being someone who hates corruption, considering what Yagura did to Kirigakure thanks to a certain Uchiha controlling the jinchuuriki. And when it comes to Haku, expect Zabuza to act completely different than he would with anyone else. Because in canon, Zabuza was the very person to mention that, no matter how much a shinobi tried to act like an emotionless machine, they were still human.

Oh and Haku refuses to give Chōko her ribbon, much to her annoyance. That’s about it for now. This A/N is going on far longer than it should, though I should say this before I end this and that’s I’M FINALLY OUT OF SCHOOL! FUCK YEAH! Expect to see more chapters out of me, so until next time, everyone!
There were a lot of things that I never thought I would ever find myself doing—applying make-up to Haku's face was just that. According to another response that we had received from the Sandaime in Konoha, Haku was to pass off as female upon entering Konoha, with Zabuza going under a similar process in the form of a disguise. Haku passing off as female shouldn't be too hard, and the make-up was mostly for aesthetic, which Haku just wanted to wear.

Zabuza, on the other hand, was a little annoyed that he had to remove his bandages off his face and use a small transformation technique to hide his jagged teeth. He also had to store his sword into a sealing scroll, since the Kubikiribōchō was a huge giveaway to his identity. It is rather hard to ignore that Zabuza is one of the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist.

Tomorrow is the day we leave Wave and right now, we are just preparing Haku and Zabuza for their identification pictures for when we arrive at Konoha. Even though they're allowed into the village, they still have to keep quiet on their presence because Zabuza still has a bounty in the bingo books. Haku is…mostly safe, for the most part, since one thing Zabuza had managed to do with Haku was keep the boy's existence under wraps. Considering the prejudices that existed in Kirigakure in regards to those with kekkei genkai and the bloodline purges that have occurred...it was probably for the best for Haku.

Haku was never officially registered under Kirigakure's ninja registry, which was the usual standard, as shown with other Genin from both that village and other hidden villages. Through technicalities, Haku, despite being quite skilled, has no rank whatsoever. In fact, the hitai-ate on his forehead was mostly to show his affiliation with Zabuza.

Going through that logic, Haku wasn't in need of asking permission to switch villages, as he never had anything officially tying him down to Kirigakure. However—what was keeping that from happening is the fact that, legally, Haku was considered a civilian and, therefore, still considered a child through civilian standards, which puts Zabuza as his guardian. As Haku's guardian, Zabuza stood as the only technicality tying Haku down to Kirigakure. Until Zabuza's situation was resolved, Haku couldn't make the switch in villages either.

"Politics sure are troublesome…"

"Steady…" I found myself saying as I carefully applied a light shade of pink lipstick to Haku's lips. I was holding his chin in my left hand, trying my hardest not to screw up.

For the past half hour or so, I have been helping Haku with his appearance. From his hair, to his state of attire, to now—I have had a hand in helping enhance his already feminine-looking appearance. It was strange…in the sense that Haku was completely into this. Unlike with Neji, who was always reluctant with anything that left him looking remotely like a girl, Haku didn't mind.

If I had to be honest, I was quite enjoying this. I was getting a lot of Kuranosuke vibes from Haku and I loved it. I may have also gotten some Ringo vibes, but I was more informed about Kuragehime than Uta no Prince-sama. It just felt nice to have some sort of connection to my past life—even if it was through these means.

At the moment, it was just the two of us, alone, in the guest room. Tsunami had lent me her make-up
kit, which she rarely used, as well as a mirror, in case Haku wanted to check his reflection. For the most part, it was rather quiet in the room, which was part of my goal when I asked everyone to leave. The other, was making sure that no one was there to watch me do my job, which certainly took a huge weight off my shoulders.

*I don't like being watched…*

"Hmm…" I pursed my lips as I looked over Haku's face. One of the things that I liked about Haku was that he didn't need much make-up, but that also made my job much harder because I didn't want to accidentally go overboard with the make-up. I tried to stay as subtle as ever, and I think I just managed. "Okay, you can open your eyes."

And when Haku did, I nearly had a heart attack. People should not be *that* pretty! It just isn't fair and yes, I'm jealous—*extremely*. I just…want his hair and maybe his face.

"Is there something wrong, Chōko-san?" Haku asked me as I removed my hand from his chin.

"No…maybe…" Excuse me for a moment while I lament my plainness. It should only take a moment.

Haku blinked a few times and grabbed the mirror on the floor to take a look at his reflection. Once he had seen himself in the mirror, he looked at me and smiled. "You did a great job!"

I felt my cheeks heat up. "N-No problem…"

"So why do you look so sad?" Oh, goddammit, Haku—stop looking at me with those *eyes*!

"I'm not sad…" Okay, maybe I am—but I don't want to talk about it.

"Are you still mad at me that I won't return your ribbon?" Haku asked. "Or maybe…it's because you're jealous?"

Oh fuck, he saw right through me! "Am I…that obvious?"

Haku just smiled. "No, not really… You're just not the first girl to give me that look."

Really? "Do tell."

"Working with Zabuza-sama has given me so many opportunities to meet new people," Haku explained. "And among those new people, were girls like you."

"Like…me…" I repeated.

"Hmm…" Haku thought for a moment. "Well, yes and no…Most of those girls refused to acknowledge that I was male, but you…you're different. Why is that?"

"If you say you're male, then you're male." Who am I to say you're not, just because of your appearance? "Prettiness has nothing to do with gender."

"Well said…" Haku seemed impressed. "Since we're on the topic of prettiness, how about I make you pretty?"

I blinked. "Huh?"

…
"Are you two ladies done yet?" I couldn't even begin to imagine what was going on through Zabuza's head when he walked in on Haku and I. My glasses were off, my eyes were closed, and Haku was in the middle of applying make-up to my face. It was pretty quiet after Zabuza had opened the door…and just as quickly as he had opened the door, he closed it.

"Wh-What happened?" I almost opened my eyes, but Haku stopped me.

"Nothing happened, now just keep your eyes closed," Haku calmly said. "We wouldn't want to mess up, now would we?"

True…but I still want to know what's up after this. As soon as Haku is done applying my make-up—why am I even trusting him to do a good job when he asked me for help? That was certainly a question that was plaguing my mind until after Haku had done his job and I had gotten a good look at my reflection.

I was wearing my glasses, since I really can't see anything, such as my reflection, without them. The joys of being a glasses-wearing girl with hyperopia—it sure does limit my ability to apply my own make-up without any hassles. Anyways, I was looking over what Haku had managed to accomplish, and that was concealing the markings on my cheeks. I consider that a good start, because clan markings were something you had to be careful about concealing, as Hana, Kiba's older sister, can confirm.

You had to be able to conceal the markings without bringing any attention to the make-up used in the area. As Suzume-sensei had once said in kunoichi classes, make-up used to hide markings, tattoos, or scars, has to appear natural. The fact that Haku was able to do this so easily just made me wonder why he even bothered to ask for my help.

Then I noticed my eyes and holy crap, Haku knows how to use liquid eyeliner—like, what the hell?! That took me years of practice and I know for sure that Haku has never taken a kunoichi class, having learned everything from Zabuza, so what the hell? How?

"I might have learned a few things going undercover as a hikkomi at a few brothels." Haku's smile was so innocent, but his words…"Oiran have quite the education—even more than the typical geisha, if you know what I mean."

God dammit, I don't want to know what he means, but this fucking knowledge I have on oiran prevents me from saying otherwise, because I know what he means! Ahhh…this is why I started getting awkward around kunoichi classes once the sexual education came into play. I am so glad that seduction missions are Chuunin-only…

And optional, did I mention they're optional, because they totally are and that certainly took a lot of pressure off of me when I learned that and ahhhh, I'm totally blushing, aren't I?! "I don't want to know what you mean!"

Don't look at me with that face!

Thud!

"Uugh…" For quite a brief moment, I saw stars…then I saw the ceiling and felt a throbbing pain in the back of my head. And after a few seconds, I saw Haku's pretty face, looking at me with his big, brown eyes.

"Are you okay?" Haku looked concerned. "Is your head fine?"
"Fine…" Sort of...okay, my head is hurting, but I don't think it's that bad… "Please don't say stuff like that again."

It makes everything awkward and I don't do well with awkward…

"Oh, I apologize, then!" Haku smiled. "So what did you think? Did I do a good job or…?"

I sat up and adjusted my glasses before looking at my reflection again in the mirror Haku held up for me. "It's...good—though, why did you ask me to do your make-up for you?"

"Because you look like someone who would enjoy such a job!" was Haku's response and *dammit*—he was right! "Also, I hope you don't mind the shade of lipstick I used on you, but I thought it would be nice for us to match!"

"Lipstick?" I blinked and looked at my reflection again. Pale pink...the exact same color I had used on Haku. I'm honestly surprised at how it doesn't look gaudy on me. "Haku…"

"Hmm?" Haku tilted his head to the side.

"Thank you…" For being alive...you and Zabuza—just thank you.

... 

As soon as the pictures were taken, Zabuza was quick to replace the bandages that had once covered the lower half of his face. Haku, on the other hand, was content to keep his current appearance. As for me, I would have continued wearing the make-up Haku had applied to my face, but then Kakashi told me to remove it and threw a small towel in my face.

To say that I was annoyed would be an understatement. I have had too much experience with make-up to *know* a good job when I see it and to have to remove it not even an hour after it was applied—ugh, it just pissed me off. Like, what a waste!

At least Naruto managed to use Shisui's camera to take a picture of Haku and I while we were dolled up, so it wasn't that much of a waste, I guess... I'm still mad. I mean, taking off make-up is an annoying task within itself. It's what made me both like and hate make-up.

It took me a total of ten minutes to remove my make-up. My face was slightly red in areas where I had rubbed a bit too hard and I had gotten soap in my eye during the removal process. I was *not* in a good mood when I walked out of the bathroom. And when Kakashi showed up to check up on me, to see if I had done as I was told, I threw the damp towel I had used to clean my face at him. I scowled when I saw him catch it before it could even slap him in the face.

"You are the worst sensei ever…" I spat at him, scowling when Kakashi reached down to ruffle my hair. No one knew how to read me better than Sensei, himself... He definitely knew I hadn't meant what I had said.

Still didn't make it any less annoying…

... 

About an hour later, I was with Sasuke and Naruto in the guest room, where Naruto was rubbing down the fox kits to keep them warm. Sasuke was currently talking it over with Hanī about his contract with her. And I was looking through all the sweet loot I had pocketed from Gatou's base.
Just looking at all this pretty, shiny jewelry certainly made me feel better, after what Kakashi made me do… Dammit, now I'm thinking of that stupid ring again. Uurgh, I really wanted it, but why did it have to freaking fit him?! I made a face as I slipped a bracelet on my left wrist. At least this fits me…

I still want my ribbon back… "Hey, Naruto?"

"Yes?" Naruto turned to me.

"Where did you buy my ribbon?" Maybe I can find a replacement there…

I yawned loudly as we made our way to the finished bridge the next day. Tazuna, Tsunami, Inari, and a few others were there to see us all off. Promises were made to visit and Naruto had a rather tearful farewell with Inari, who was sad to see him go. Sasuke was rather calm, as were Zabuza and Haku.

As for me, I was contemplating on what exactly it was that I was feeling. Was I sad? I…don't know, but there's some part of me that feels a sense of stability. Maybe…it was because most of what had been stressing me out was finally over. I went into this entire situation without a plan and, honestly, I'm amazed everything turned out the way it did.

I nearly killed someone in the process, and I'm pretty sure I'll be having nightmares of what could have happened, had I not hit the right spot. Thankfully, I haven't had any…yet. Maybe just seeing Haku alive and well was enough to prevent it.

Hahaha, oh man—if this is going to turn into what happened before the Uchiha Clan Massacre, where my mental health benefited from just seeing Sasuke and Itachi together, then this is seriously gonna suck.

I yawned again, tears welling up in the corners of my eyes. I was exhausted. About halfway through the night, Naruto's fox kits started crying and woke all of us up. It took about two hours before they stopped crying and fell asleep. To be honest, it was at least better than not being able to sleep, but the exhaustion from interrupted sleep is still there.

"How long do you think it will take before we get to Konoha?" I asked Kakashi.

"Since we're no longer guarding a civilian, it shouldn't take us that long," Kakashi replied. "Then again, Naruto does have his kits…"

"Riiight…" There was that…hmm… "Hey, Naruto, what do you think of Yuu for the albino kit?"

We never did start naming them just yet…and I've had my eye on the white-furred fox kit since I first laid my eyes on it. So far, it was the only one we can really name without it getting mixed up with the other kits. Naruto was planning on buying collars to differentiate the kits after we name them.

"Within two weeks or so, the kits' coat should be changing colors- tebayo!" Naruto said as he looked at the sleeping fox kits in the basket he was carrying. "It usually happens when the black eye streak appears."

"How do you know this?" Kakashi looked questioningly at Naruto.

"Once again, not me…" Again, I am more for birds than any other animal, even though I do like me
some foxes.

"I got really bored one day and looked up a book about foxes at the library-ttebayo!" Naruto explained.

"Why foxes?" Haku asked.

"They…seemed interesting." Naruto was hiding something and I think it most likely had to do that he looked up foxes because of the Kyuubi.

"It proved useful in this situation, didn't it?" Sasuke pointed out. "I don't see anything worth questioning it anymore."

_Yup, totally has to do with Kurama…_

... 

... 

It took us a total of two and a half days to reach Konohagakure at the speed we were going at. Truth be told, we could have arrived in two days, but then we had to take some time to prepare Zabuza and Haku for their disguises, so that their appearances matched their identification pictures.

Hagane Kotetsu and Kamizuki Izumo were rarely ever seen on their own without each other. I wasn't that surprised to see them on guard duty today when we had approached the front gates of the village. Thanks to Kakashi sending one of his ninken to deliver a message the day before we left Wave, Kotetsu and Izumo had the identification pictures with them, which made entering Konohagakure much easier than it would have, had they not had the pictures.

It honestly felt good to be back home, even though we still had to report to the Mission Assignment Desk before anything. Still—seeing Haku's pretty face turning heads was worth it. He certainly seemed to be enjoying it and complimented me on my make-up skills…then Kakashi literally got in between us and forced a change in subject in regards to the fact that what was originally a C-rank mission became an A-rank, with input from the Hokage. Luckily, thanks to the raid at Gatou's base, Wave actually had the funds to pay for such a mission.

Zabuza sure looked smug when Kakashi had mentioned this.

"Just know I'll be handling this," Kakashi told me. "You don't have to worry about saying anything—the Sandaime should know about it. Just focus on heading home to check in with your mother after we report our mission."

"Okay…why are you only telling me this, though?" Is there something I should know?

"Maa, we're going to need your clan's help with Haku and Zabuza," Kakashi replied. "And it would make it easier for all of us if you gave them a heads up before I bring these two over."

Oh…that's what it is… "You know, it would be nice if you were there as support, considering the explanation I'm going to have to give Kaa-chan when she notices my hair and finds out about the A-rank."

"She shouldn't find out about the A-rank until later on, when your father gets home," Kakashi said before ruffling my hair. "Just stay calm and be yourself."

Right…myself… "Gotcha."
Well, this is gonna be a pain in the ass…thanks a lot, Kakashi! Way to throw me under the bus! You are so lucky I got as much pretty jewelry as I did! Nobody wants to see an angry Ageha…nobody.

…I didn’t stick around too long for the mission debriefing that occurred after we had checked in at the Mission Assignment Desk. Iruka looked about ready to faint when he saw my short hair and saw that Naruto was a proud parent to nine fox kits. He also looked close to strangling Kakashi for allowing us to continue with the mission when it had escalated from its supposed C-rank to what it was now, which was an A-rank.

We had spent a total of three weeks in Wave, not including the days it took us to get to and return from Wave. Altogether, however, our mission lasted a duration of approximately four weeks. Four weeks equals to twenty-eight days, which was exactly a month…and in only a couple of days, Chōji and I would be turning thirteen. I seriously feel old, but more so in the sense that I’m reaching the next stage in life—which is adolescence.

Uuugh, I am totally not looking forward to puberty… Though, in hindsight, it isn't too bad—I mean, I made it this far in life to reach this stage without dying. Let’s just hope I can make it to adulthood as well…me and everyone else.

…I

When I had arrived home, I felt safe…then I entered the compound and literally ran into my brother.

Thud!

"Oww…" Okay, nobody move…my glasses fell off.

"What the…Chōko, you're home—what happened to your hair?!" Oh shit, I forgot about taking Chōji’s reaction into consideration!

Ahahha, fuck.

"Ehehe…" My laughter was awkward, as was the expression on my face as, even without my glasses, I could tell that whatever expression Chōji had on his face was of concern. "I can explain?"

Oh hell, I had a lot of explaining to do. But before that—could I get a little help finding my glasses?

Without even needing to say anything, Chōji handed me my glasses and then helped me off the ground. A few seconds after I had placed on my glasses, Chōji suddenly embraced me and told me, "Welcome home."

My heart felt rather warm and fuzzy just hearing those words. "Sorry if I worried you…"

Chōji released me and then placed his hands on my shoulders. He looked over me, his gaze focusing on my hair, most likely, before asking, "What happened?"

"It's…complicated…" And by that, I mean this is a matter that I need to tell Mama. "Do you have anywhere you need to be or what?"

"Asuma-sensei invited us out for barbeque to reward us for our progress," Chōji replied.

Barbeque…Chōji loves barbeque—and I'm keeping him from that?! "You can go ahead! Don't let
me keep you waiting! I'm fine! I've been meaning to cut my hair, so don't worry!"

"Chōko, you've been gone for a month and this is how you return," Chōji remarked. "I have every reason to worry, so explain. Barbeque can wait."

"Uumm…" I bit my lip. "Look, this is something I have to tell Kaa-chan, first…you can go! You'll find out later, when you come back. Kakashi-sensei and the others will be here, so you'll hear the whole story."

Chōji looked at me for a good, long moment before sighing. "Fine—but only because you're telling me I can go!"

I smiled at Chōji and nodded. "Okay…see ya around!"

Chōji left after that, running as fast as his legs could carry him. When it came to barbeque, Chōji would do just about anything. If I recalled, Asuma had used that to his advantage in getting Chōji to participate in the preliminary part of the Chuunin exams…

"Hmm…" It's already that time of the year for the Chuunin exams, though whether or not it will take place this coming month or the next was a question I still haven't figured out. Hopefully, it's next month, when I'll have had enough time to recuperate from that A-rank—speaking of which, I still need to tell Mama.

Uugh, considering how Chōji had reacted, I'm hoping Mama won't react similarly…

...

"What happened to your hair?!"

Abort! Abort! Abort!

"Oh no you don't, little lady!" Nooo, release me! "You will explain to me what happened to your hair, right now."

Oh god, this was a terrible idea—Kakashi, you ass, you should be the one dealing with this!

Why did I tell Chōji to go?! Whyyyyyy?!

...

...

When Kakashi arrived at the compound later in the evening, with the others, Mama was not pleased. She was glaring at Kakashi the entire time, while I stood at her side, inwardly crying over how scary she could be when she wanted to. I almost thought that she was about ready to grab Kakashi by his flak jacket and demand an explanation…then Kakashi spoke up.

"If you wish to learn more of your daughter, I suggest you speak with him," Kakashi said as he gestured at Zabuza, who seemed slightly intimidated by Mama's stare.

I swear I could see the fire in Ageha's eyes ignite when her gaze focused on Zabuza, who was in a civilian disguise. When Mama suddenly grabbed Zabuza by the shirt, I was worried about Haku's reaction, considering how protective he was of Zabuza. Fortunately, Kakashi managed to apprehend Haku, so that he wasn't a danger to my mom. Unfortunately, Zabuza still had to deal with Mama's rage.
And there goes that sliding door, with Zabuza!

"Kaa-chan!" Oh god, dammit, mother, don't antagonize the missing-nin!

"Tell me why my daughter's hair is short!" Ageha's voice boomed. "You are ten seconds away from getting thrown through another door!"

Mama, **stop!** You're attracting attention from the other clan members! Mama, **nooooo!**

…

…

About half an hour later, after my father had managed to calm Mama to a certain point so that she was no longer throwing Zabuza around like a rag doll, we were all sitting at the dinner table, eating dinner. Chōji had arrived not too long ago and was getting the memo from Mama, who still wasn't too happy to hear that her daughter's hair was cut off with the intention of it being a trophy.

"I thought your mother was a civilian…" Zabuza certainly looked worse for wear after his encounter with Mama.

"Allied Mothers Force," I answered with a sigh before biting into a pork bun.

The Allied Mothers Force was an age-old Konohagakure team made up solely of all the mothers in the village who were more than capable of fighting back when the opportunity arose. During wartime, they would protect the village and those left within it until their loved ones returned from war. Mama's mother was part of the generation that defended Konoha during the Third Shinobi World War.

"Wow, this is delicious!" Haku suddenly said, most likely in an attempt to change the subject. "Did you make this, Akimichi-san?"

Ageha blinked and smiled at Haku. "Why, yes I did, Haku-chan—you don't mind if I call you that, do you, dear?"

Haku smiled and shook his head. "Not at all…though, I am a boy."

"My, and such a pretty boy at that!" Mama—Mama, **no!** "Who did your make-up?"

"Why your daughter did," Haku replied calmly. "She is certainly skilled."

I felt my cheeks heat up when he said this. I averted my gaze and focused on eating dinner.

"Your daughter is also the reason I'm still alive." Haku, don't you dare lie! "To be honest, if she didn't do what she had done, I probably would have done something I would have regretted."

What do you…oh shit, Haku's got a point—he could have gotten a Lightning Cutter through the chest had I **not** put him in a state of momentary death and freaked out when I did.

**Oh god—I need a moment…**

"Is there any reason why you're wearing Chōko's ribbon?" Chōji's question nearly caused me to choke on the food I had in my mouth.
I swallowed hard and blurted out, "He's borrowing it!"

…

"Sorry…" I looked down as my face started to heat up immensely. I was blushing…hard.

Then my father started laughing. "Chōko must really trust you to lend out her ribbon like that!"

"I have never gone a day without seeing that ribbon in her hair until now," Mama added. "Then again, I have never seen her with short hair until now."

Oh shit—she's glaring at Zabuza again!

Mama, please don't!

"Ahem, first impressions aside, there's a favor we'd like to ask of you," Kakashi decided to change the subject. "As you already know, this person here is Momochi Zabuza, the Demon of the Hidden Mist and a missing-nin from Kirigakure."

"I have been made aware of this when I found out about the A-rank upgrade your C-rank mission received," Chōza remarked. "Tell me—why is there a missing-nin with you?"

"He's going to switch villages and live with us-ttebayo!" Naruto exclaimed. "It was my idea and Jiji is working on it!"

…

"So I take it you need the Akimichi clan's support for this action, am I correct?" Chōza looked at Kakashi.

Kakashi ran his hand through his hair. "That is correct…I hope you can put aside your differences for this cause. Without Zabuza, we cannot accept Haku into the village, as Zabuza is his guardian."

"And Haku is a survivor of the Kirigakure bloodline purges," Sasuke added. "Even with the new Mizukage, attitudes take time to change."

"Please?" Naruto looked at my parents with those eyes of his. "They need us-ttebayo…"

I could see Mama's expression starting to soften, though my father still seemed unconvinced. It was probably difficult to get past the fact that Zabuza had cut off my hair as a trophy and had intended on taking me as his student.

"If not for me, then do it for Haku," Zabuza decided to speak. "He deserves a second chance, unlike me."

That was by far the most unselfish thing I had ever seen Zabuza do. It was rather jarring, but then again, Haku was involved and whenever Haku was involved, Zabuza had a tendency of showing his true colors. It was through this that my father had finally made a decision.

"I'll see what I can do," is what he said. "Keep in mind that you still have to receive a pardon from your Mizukage."

"Jiji's working on that, too-ttebayo!" Naruto exclaimed. "So did you hear that, Haku? You and Zabuza get to stay here with us!"

"I'm glad," Haku smiled. "What about you, Zabuza-sama?"
Zabuza tried to act passive, but failed when Haku looked at him with that face. Zabuza sighed and patted Haku on the head. "It's not over just yet, you know."

"I know." Haku nodded his head. "But it is a start…"

"Right…a start…" Zabuza sighed. "Gonna be a pain in the ass to get through Kirigakure to meet up with Mei."

Wait, what?

"That's what happens when you're a missing-nin," Kakashi stated. "And that's why you shouldn't leave your village."

"Don't use me as a lesson!" Zabuza snapped at Kakashi.

"Wait…what did he mean by that?" I thought all we had to do was wait for a response from the Mizukage!

"Did you really think it was that easy for a missing-nin like me to receive a pardon from Mei?" Zabuza looked rather amused. "I have to meet up with her in person—that's how these things work."

"And guess who's escorting us to Kirigakure!" Haku smiled innocently.

"We are, dattebayo!" Naruto laughed. "Jiji said it's going to be a C-rank mission!"

"Another one?" Chōji made a face. "Didn't you just get here?"

"We did…" Sasuke sighed. "But we're not leaving until the Sandaime makes arrangements for the trip to Kirigakure."

"Apart from the trip, we also need special permission, as we are foreigners to Kirigakure," Kakashi explained. "Fortunately, for us, the Godaime has already gave word that badges granting us access to her village have been sent. They should be arriving by the end of this week, so do take the time to prepare."

One mission right after the other…at least this one is a legit C-rank.

"Couldn't they have sent someone else to do such a mission?" Mama doesn't seem so pleased with the news. "They've only just returned!"

"We are responsible for these two," Kakashi stated. "As such, it is our duty to escort them to Kirigakure in order to receive a pardon from the Godaime Mizukage, Terumī Mei."

"Besides, it was Naruto's idea in the first place." Always ready to give others up, that Sasuke was. "It was only fitting we get the mission."

"Ahaha…" Naruto rubbed the back of his head.

I looked at my teammates and sighed. "You guys are too much, sometimes…"

"Don't worry—I will still protect you with my life," Kakashi said with a smile on his face, his right eye curved upwards.

"As their sensei, it's only natural for you to do such." Chōza nodded his head. "Now is there anything else I should know?"
"Maa, there is something I need to speak to you in private for…" Kakashi stood up from his seat. "Shall we?"

"Very well." Chōza stood up as well.

The two left the table after that, leaving the rest of us behind. Mama tried to force a smile as she looked at Zabuza, who seemed slightly unnerved by her stare.

"So how did a missing-nin like you raise such a kind boy as Haku?" Wow, Mama, just wow...

"Honestly, it's a question I've always wondered myself," Zabuza admitted. "Haku is whoever he wants to be, and I probably should be content with that instead of trying to force him to be who he isn't."

I think Zabuza was referring to the "tool" mindset he tried to reinforce on Haku. That still doesn't make this conversation any less jarring. I mean, Zabuza is still the Demon of the Mist (and for good reason), but he is also a guardian to Haku and, by the looks of it, a very good one.

"So did you know your daughter called Haku, 'gorgeous'?" Shut up, Zabuza!

"Again, Chōko?" Mama, noooo! "I hope she didn't catch you by surprise too much, Haku-chan."

Oh my god, this is embarrassing...

"She actually did," Haku was not ashamed to admit that. "But it seems this isn't the first time she's done it."

"Chōko has a tendency to speak what's on her mind," Mama continued, even though I telling her no. "Fortunately, it's always good things—like compliments and the like. And in case you're wondering, she had meant what she said to you."

I covered my face as all attention focused on me. I'm pretty sure my face was redder than a tomato. God dammit, Mama, why?! Why?! What did I ever do to deserve this?!

"As I had said before, I really did appreciate your compliment." Shut up, Haku—you're making this worse!

Then everyone started laughing, and that's when I realized that today was so not my day.

"You guys are awful!" I refused to look at anyone in the eye after that.

...

Sometime later, I could be found hiding under the covers of my futon, which is where Chōji found me after dinner. Despite what had been a terrible first impresión, Zabuza had managed to get on my parents' good side. Of course, Haku probably helped in that regard.

"So why was Haku wearing your ribbon?" Chōji asked me.

I peeked out from under the covers and found myself looking right at my brother. "You know how Zabuza gave me a haircut? My ribbon was still on my braid and he gave it to Haku. And because he gave it to Haku, I'm not getting it back until I replace it with another ribbon."

"I see..." Chōji nodded his head. "So...our birthday is coming up and I was wondering if you were going to spend it with your team or...what? I need to know since you keep forgetting to come home."
Oh right—that's a thing...aahaha, whoops!

I laughed awkwardly. "Don't worry—I'll try to come over for dinner at the least!"

Chōji smiled. "That's good to hear. It's nice that you're getting along with your team, but try to remember to come back home every once in a while."

"So..." I said as I sat up. "What's been happening since we left Konoha?"

"Where do I start?" Chōji said as he sat down next to me.

"Any C-ranks for you guys?" C'mon, spill!

"Yeah, we just got off one a couple of days ago," Chōji replied. "Team 8 is currently on a C-rank mission—they'll be back in a few days."

I see... "So what was it that you had to do?"

"We had to escort someone, like you, except our mission kept its C-rank."

"Me neither..." I mean, I never intended my hair to get this short. "Been referring to Team 7 as Team Spiky Hair because of it..."

"Team Spiky Hair—oh, I see!" Chōji caught on and when he did, he started laughing. "You know, Ino's not going to like it when she sees your long hair is gone."

"Oh, it'll grow back..." It's just hair. "It's better than having that long braid getting stuck on a branch or something..."

Never again!

"Hey, Chōko...?"

"Yeah?"

"It's good to have you home again."

"It's good to be home."

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entrance. There were various hair accessories, ranging from headbands to hairpins, alongside the ribbons. There was also a small mirror that was propped on the table and a middle-aged woman kept a close eye on eyes from the register after we had entered.

She greeted us with a smile, taking a special interest in Haku, recommending a hairpin to him. Haku smiled back at the woman and said that he would consider it. I made a face at Haku as I looked through the ribbons.

"You sure know how to make people feel good..." I'm starting to feel a little suspicious of him.

"That's how I am..." Haku's smile was innocent...a little too innocent. "So what do you have in mind for me?"

Hmm...what color would go good with Haku—I know! "Your name means white, so I'm thinking of a white ribbon to match."

Haku blinked. "White?"

"It's also the color of snow!" And I know your kekkei genkai revolves around Ice Release! "So what do you think of this ribbon?"

I held out a pure white ribbon toward Haku. The ribbon looked exactly like the one Naruto had gotten me five years ago—the very same one Haku was currently wearing in his hair. Haku looked at the ribbon for a good minute before smiling.

"I think that would be lovely," is what he said before untying the green ribbon in his hair. "I guess it's time for me to return your ribbon now...at least let me tie it for you."

"Okay..." At least I'm getting my ribbon back—finally!

It didn't take Haku too long to tie the green ribbon back into my hair, though what puzzled me was the way in which he tied it on. It was only after he had told me to look in the mirror that I found out what he had done. He had helped me find an alternative to wearing my ribbon, since my hair was no longer long enough to wear in a braid.

The way Haku had tied the ribbon into my hair was rather cute. It reminded me a lot of a certain Dragon Ball character who was capable of switching personalities through a simple sneeze. The longer I looked at my reflection, the more I felt like keeping this tie. It helped that I had kept my bangs—probably the only thing that was left over after my haircut.

"Do you like it?" Haku asked me.

I blinked and turned away from the mirror to look at Haku. "Yeah, I like it—thank you!"

"No problem," was Haku's response. He seemed oddly calm, despite having just given up a gift that Zabuza had given him.

"Say...since you tied my ribbon for me—can I do the same for you...?" I really wanted to return the favor...

"Right after you pay for it!" Haku replied.

I blinked again and smiled. "Okay, fair enough!"

A couple of minutes later, Haku could be seen leaving the shop with me. A white ribbon had
replaced the green ribbon that had been tied around his ponytail. Haku and I matched, in the sense that we both wore ribbons in our hair. And when I saw how well the white ribbon had suited Haku even more than the green, Naruto's words popped up in my head.

"There's just something about that ribbon that just makes it part of you! It's what makes you...well, you!"

Naruto was certainly right about that, I guess. Going by that logic, the reason why the white ribbon fit Haku so well was because it just belonged to him. It's...weird that Haku and I even got into a situation involving a ribbon. Still, he seemed happy, so I guess I should be, too.

"Oh, and Chōko-san?" Haku looked at me.

"Hmm?" I blinked.

"Happy birthday!" he said with a smile on his face.

Oh, I guess it is my birthday...ahaha, I can't believe I forgot something like that! "Thank you!"

Chapter End Notes

So Vampirelover12100 drew another cute picture of Chōko! I highly suggest you go check it out! By the by, Chōko now has her ribbon on in the same way Lunch/Launch from Dragon Ball wears it, so expect her to keep that look from here on out since the long hair is gone! In any case, the way Haku has been so far, he's starting to give me Kuranosuke vibes. Kuranosuke is a character from this josei manga, called Kuragehime, or Princess Jellyfish. I highly recommend it, as it is a great read and watch—only eleven episodes for the anime, by the way! And the manga is still ongoing!

As for Ringo, he's from Uta no Prince-sama and absolutely LOVE his character design and it's such a shame that otome games rarely ever get localized, because that is seriously the reason why my information on this pretty, pretty man is so limited. Ugh, I really want to play Uta no Prince-sama since the anime left me a little unsatisfied—I want more, dang it! DX

So the reason these two guys were brought up is because of their crossdressing habits and, currently, Haku shows an interest in it, here. It's more that I see Haku being someone who has an interest in female fashion, much like Kuranosuke. That's pretty much it, so no judgement, please!

One thing I noticed about Haku is that he technically was never given a missing-nin status, in fact, he doesn't really have a rank of some sort, in terms of is he a Genin, Chuunin, or whatever. All there really is to know about him is that he learned everything from Zabuza, who would have most likely kept quiet about him. I mean, Haku does possess a kekkei genkai in a hidden village were bloodline purges have occurred... So I thought I'd give my input on where Haku stands in this fic.

So with that out of the way, a future trip to Kirigakure is near! Except to see some very familiar faces and names once Team 7 arrives there, which will hopefully be in a couple
of chapters. And before I forget, try to give a happy birthday to Chōko, who has finally turned thirteen, alongside her brother, Chōji! I thought it'd be a good way to show where the story is, time-wise, so I'll just say this now…the Chuunin exams will be coming soon, so be prepared! We're heading into plot-heavy territory!

So I hope you enjoyed this chapter, because I certainly found it interesting! Until next time, everyone!
As the week went by, our friends dropped by to visit us. For the most part, it was to leave a few birthday presents for me (mostly birthday cards) and just to congratulate us for our A-rank mission. It was from there that they became acquainted with Haku, who never seemed to be too far from my side—for some reason.

It was love at first sight for Ino, who had an eye for pretty things. She was gushing over how beautiful Haku was, asking him about which products he used for his hair and skin. This was before she found out Haku was male and needed a good half hour to come to terms over how much of a pretty boy Haku was. Not too long ago, Ino had been mourning over the loss of my hair—which was certainly a better reaction than having Shikamaru stare at me for nearly ten minutes before asking me what happened. Sometimes, Chōji sucks, because he leaves the explaining to me instead of doing it himself.

Thankfully, Chōji changed the subject by asking about Naruto's fox kits and let me tell you how that went… All I'm going to say is that Naruto has some freaking Mae Hughes vibes coming off of him in regards to those foxes. He is just so damned proud of those little kits and I'm just wondering what Kurama even thinks of the entire situation involving the kits.

Speaking of Kurama, I'm sort of wary of him right now, considering what happened when Naruto had thought Sasuke had died… Oh god, I don't even want to remember how Naruto was when that had happened… It was terrifying seeing Naruto go into his initial jinchuuriki form after giving into his anger.

There is seriously something wrong with just seeing someone as kind as Naruto, lose himself like that…and it sure as hell didn't help that I was pulling out senbon from Sasuke's neck as that happened. Uuugh, I could practically feel the rage emanating from Naruto's body…it was sickening.

I'm really glad that's over and I am totally not looking forward to the future, if my memory serves me well about Naruto and his jinchuuriki forms… Ugh, if recall correctly, Sakura had to heal Naruto majorly after going into one of his forms. Welp, looks like Sasuke has his work cut out for him in the future—wait, how the hell is this going to even work?! Oh god, I might as well just focus on now, instead of the future if it's that complicated…bluh.

Anyways, that was the Team 10 reaction to the current additions to Naruto's house, not including Zabuza, who was currently with Kakashi, doing a lot of paperwork (so much paperwork…). Sucks to be him, but I consider that karma for my hair! Though, one thing that struck me odd was how suspicious Shikamaru was around Haku, who was acting like a total sweetheart the entire time. Then again, Haku was someone who had nearly killed Sasuke, so there is that…

Still, it was rather perplexing to hear Shikamaru tell me, "There's something troublesome about Haku…please be careful."

I had not been expecting that… But since Shikamaru was more perceptive than he appeared, I decided not to completely ignore his words. I mean, I'm still having trouble seeing how 'troublesome' Haku is, but Shikamaru does have a point in us keeping our guard up around the boy. There was still much to learn about Haku and the fact that he had been raised by Zabuza was something that shouldn't be overlooked.
Though, upon seeing Haku's reaction to having Kiba hit on him, it made me think twice. Nice to see I've already lost one of my friends to puberty… I don't even think any of us had the heart to tell Kiba that Haku was male—not even Haku, himself…or it could be that Haku was being a troll. Haku did like to keep up his female façade as long as he could before revealing the actual truth.

Meanwhile with Hinata, Naruto was catching up with her and started off their conversation with him handing her a black pearl ring, saying he thought she would have liked it. It was the very same ring that he and Sasuke had been fighting over back at Gatou's base. Sasuke looked a bit miffed, but decided to let it be since Hinata seemed to like it well enough.

As for Shino, he was rather quiet until Naruto handed him a sealing scroll. When Shino asked what it was, Naruto just said to open it up and when Shino did, he was pleasantly surprised to find a couple of beetles inside a small container and a rather pretty orchid.

"I thought you might have wanted to add more to your compound-ttebayo." Naruto grinned as he rubbed the back of his head. "And when we were coming back from the Land of Waves, I saw some beetles and thought of you, so…"

"Thank you very much, Naruto-kun." Shino was certainly grateful.

"Hey, where's my present?!" And Kiba was very much jealous.

Bark!

As was Akamaru, so Naruto ended up buying the two something food-related. When in doubt, food always seemed to appease Kiba and his partner, Akamaru. Speaking of Akamaru, he seemed rather friendly around the fox kits, which was a good thing.

It had been a good week, so far… It certainly gave us enough time to recover from our mission in Wave. Though, just as we were getting rather comfortable in Konoha, Kakashi decided to drop by one morning to tell us we were leaving tomorrow for Kirigakure. Talk about timing…

"Yeah, it's too early for this shit…" Sasuke said as he got up from the dining table. "If any of you guys need me, I'll be in my room, sleeping."

I just stayed in my seat, blinking a few times, wondering if I had everything ready for the trip. When I asked Naruto, who was in the middle of feeding a fox kit, he seemed calmed at first…then he exclaimed, "Shit!"

If Sasuke were here, he would have smacked Naruto upside the head for that, but he was already in his room, probably asleep. As soon as Naruto had finished feeding the fox kit, he place the little kit back in the basket with the others, picked the basket up, and ran upstairs, leaving me alone with Haku. I looked at the bowls and plates Naruto and Sasuke left behind and sighed.

"Help me out, Haku?" I really don't like washing dishes, but it was something that needed to be done.

"Sure!" Haku replied. "Say, do you want to go shopping with me? I saw this kimono the other day and thought you might like it."

Normally, I'd pass something like that down, because of how fucking expensive kimono were (I'd rather let my mother handle stuff like that). However, since we returned from Wave, money had become anything but a problem. So one little kimono couldn't hurt and considering my current kimono wasn't exactly up to my standards in aesthetics, for the exact reason I have nicknamed it the Saionji kimono (it was orange, with tiny cat face prints on the green obi—I have never been so glad
to have not been born a blonde) … I was good with finding a replacement.

Of course, when we got there, the focus quickly switched from me to Haku after I found out that there weren't many good kimono in my size (or rather, any that had caught my eye). Meanwhile with Haku, there were so many beautiful kimono in his size that it was almost annoying… almost. My annoyance quickly waned when Haku started trying on the various kimono that I had picked out for him.

Haku had been meaning to buy me a kimono, but instead, I had bought him one, instead. Rather ironic, don't you think? I quite enjoyed it, though... then Haku decided to repay the favor by buying me a dress in the shop right next to the one we had finished exiting. This time, it was much easier to find something that caught my eye and when Haku held out a blue, sleeveless dress for me to try on, I was ecstatic.

The skirt went just below my knees and when I spun around, it twirled with me. I like these types of dresses… I still prefer wearing shorts and pants, though, but I could make do without for just a bit when it comes to wearing pretty dresses— especially if they're blue! I just like blue, okay?

"Hey, Chōko-san, come out!" Haku called out for me while I was in the dressing room. "You need to look at this!"

Upon exiting the dressing room, I found myself looking directly at a white pinafore Haku was holding out to me. He was smiling.

"This dress comes with a cute apron!" he said as he walked over to me. "Let me put it on for you!"

And he did. Right after he tied the back of the pinafore for me, I looked at myself in the mirror that had been propped on the wall inside the dressing room I was in, might have smiled a bit and resisted the urge to say something that might have embarrassed myself in front of Haku. I looked good… yeah.

I might have not been able to replace the Saionji kimono, but this dress certainly makes up for it and — goddamnit, never mind. I just realized why this dress looks so familiar to me.

The name Viola definitely rings a bell… of course, it doesn't look exactly like her dress, but the pinafore and color of the dress certainly does it. Then again, I'm also getting an Alice Liddell vibe. Thinking of it now, one could say that Viola was an Alice—based on appearance only. That is something I never thought of before… still glad I'm not blonde.

"You look nice!" Haku said before walking over to the young lady running the register at the counter. "Excuse me? I would like to buy that dress over there for my friend."

And that is how I became the owner of a brand-new dress. I kept wearing it all the way back to Naruto's house, where Haku and I entered to see Kakashi and Zabuza conversing with each other in the living room. Kakashi was honestly stunned to see me in a dress and I wouldn't blame him. It's been a good long while since I last wore a dress.

Meanwhile with Zabuza, he just stared at me for a minute before turning looking at Haku and nodding his head. Then Kakashi smacked the missing-nin behind the head and that was our cue to leave the living room. We went upstairs to start packing or rather, Haku did. I was just making sure I had everything I wanted to take on me.

Tomorrow, we would be leaving sometime in the late afternoon to evening. Darkness was going to be our key ally in reaching the Land of Fire's harbor without anyone detecting Zabuza and Haku. It
was going to take a couple of days to reach the port, and from there, it would take at least a week to get to Kirigakure by boat. I was not going to like this…I could barely handle a few hours—how the hell was I going to last a week?!

It could be even longer, depending on how the weather was. Just knowing that made me consider my options for entertainment, because there really isn't much to do on a boat. So I stored my koto in a sealing scroll. It was a completely different koto from the one I had used when I was much younger, no longer being as small as I had been to warrant a need for modifications for playing convenience. Prior to graduating from the Academy, I would play my koto while our friends were around to pass the time.

*Good times…*

Speaking of which, I did just finish buying Haku a kimono, of which I picked purposely for a reason… I even bought him a yellow hairpin to go with the kimono. Hmm…I could try *that.*

…

"Haku!" I called out to the androgynous-looking boy as I ran out of my room (as much of a room I can ever call it mine in this house). "Let me into your room!"

I don't know why, but Kakashi ended up shouting, "Keep the door open when you do!"

*The fuck, man?!*

…

…

Come the next day, it was sometime in the afternoon that I left Naruto's house to go say goodbye to my mother and Chōji, assuming he was home. I had everything packed, but…it didn't hurt to have Mama look it over and get a hug from her. I'm not as nervous as last time, but I still like having some reassurance before I leave.

Chōji was home when I arrived at the Akimichi compound, as was Chōza. My entire family was there to see me off and it just made me feel warm inside. I could do this…I had nothing to worry about, even though we were leaving for Kirigakure. Kirigakure…none of us have ever been there before, except for Zabuza, Haku, and, possibly, Kakashi.

I mean, with Haku, Zabuza, and Kakashi on our sides, it shouldn't be that dangerous of a trip. That's what made it a C-rank—we were mostly just escorts to people who could very much defend themselves. It was just a standard procedure in order to ensure these two reached their destination and receive their pardon from the Mizukage. Other than that, it wasn't that difficult of a mission.

I left home shortly afterwards, feeling rather confident, unlike last time. I made my way over to the gate we were taking out of the village and saw that Kakashi was missing out of our group. He was probably paying the Memorial Stone a visit, as usual. Typical of Kakashi to do, I just hope he doesn't take too long.

Naruto was in the middle of feeding one of his kits, with Sasuke taking the time to summon Hānī for some assistance. Zabuza was looking rather disgruntled in his civilian disguise, while Haku was busy looking over the bouquet of white carnations he most likely had bought from Yamanaka Flowers.

Upon talking to Haku and asking about the flowers, I found out that he *did* buy the carnations from Yamanaka Flowers.
"I heard about Yamanaka Flowers through Ino-san and decided to check it out for myself on our way here," Haku explained. "When I saw these flowers, I couldn't help but buy some…do you want one?"

I blinked as Haku held out a white carnation in front of me. "Hmm…okay!"

Haku smiled and ended up placing the carnation where by ribbon was tied, making it seem as though the green ribbon were its leaves. Haku patted me on the head right after that, saying I looked nice. Haku sure knew how to make someone feel good…

"I meant what I said!" Haku remarked, almost as if he was quoting someone… "Like a certain someone!"

Ah, so that's where—I'll just leave you be and go help Naruto out with the foxes. "Hey, Naruto—do you have an extra bottle?"

"I was waiting for you to ask-ttebayo!" Naruto replied. "It's in my backpack."

By now, the foxes were starting to show some color, though Yuu was the only one who lacked any type of coloring aside from white, being albino and all. She (she was female, as we found out) was also the only one with a name. Naruto decided to wait until the kits were showing more color in their coat before giving them names. I thought it was a good idea.

While Naruto and I fed the kits (with some help from Hani), Sasuke was taking the time to get acquainted with three-week-old Miriku, at Hani's request. I might have seem him touching the puppy's paw a few times when he thought no one was looking…the dork. Naruto sure as hell did and wasn't exactly subtle about making it clear that he had seen Sasuke do.

"Hn…" was all Sasuke had said as he tried to seem uninterested, but seemed rather amused when Miriku started nibbling on his hand. I could tell he was going to get along with Miriku rather well, unlike with Pakkun, which I still find hilarious.

About two hours had passed before Kakashi finally showed up, making his usual excuse as always. Of course, there was still some truth to his excuse in regards to making sure the house was secure and he had even put in a couple of requests for house management while we were gone.

"It shouldn't be too difficult of a D-rank mission," Kakashi said as he reached down to ruffle my hair, which I was prepared for…only to realize his hand never touched my hair. "What…is that?"

I blinked a few times before realizing Kakashi was referring to the carnation in my hair. "It's a carnation—Haku gave to me."

"Haku…gave it to you…?" Kakashi stared at me for a moment before turning his attention to Haku, who just smiled innocently. "…"

"It's just a flower," Zabuza stated. "Haku bought 'em on our way here."

"Uh-huh…" Kakashi looked blankly at Zabuza. "Just a flower…"

"Want one?" Haku offered a white carnation to Kakashi. "There are plenty."

"No thank you…" Kakashi sounded rather annoyed. "Okay, we ought to get going, now—"

"Don't go!" a voice called out.
We all turned and saw a very familiar Hyuuga running towards us. It was Neji and he seemed to be in a hurry. He was certainly out of breath when he finally reached us.

"Don't…go…yet…" Neji huffed. "Chōko-san…!"

"What're you doing here?" I asked Neji. How did he even find out we were here? Before I could even ask another question, I found myself looking at a bouquet of sunflowers.

"For…you…" Neji was still trying to catch his breath. "I got them…for you—here!"

Neji handed the bouquet to me before reaching into his pocket to pull out a card. He handed that to me as well. When I opened the card up, I realized it was a birthday card—Neji had been meaning to give me a rather late birthday present.

"I know it's late, but I wasn't here and…I didn't know what you wanted, so I thought you might want some flowers…" Neji explained. "My team and I…we just came back from a C-rank mission today. I heard from Ino—are you really leaving for Kirigakure?"

"Yeah…we got another C-rank mission except it actually is a C-rank this time." Still not looking forward to the boat trip—nooope. "Not going to ask me about my hair?"

"Your hair—what happened to it?!" It looks like Neji just barely noticed.

I made a face as I gestured at Zabuza, who just said, "Yo."

Neji scowled at Zabuza, looking about ready to activate his Byakugan. "Who…are you?"

"Momochi Zabuza, missing-nin from Kirigakure," Zabuza answered. "The very reason these guys are leaving Konohagakure and I assume by those eyes of yours that you're a Hyuuga—am I correct?"

Neji didn't response, and just scowled at Zabuza. "…"

"Silent treatment, huh?" Zabuza seemed amused. "Look, we got off at a very bad start, but I'm hoping to change that. Haku, here, depends on it."

Neji blinked. "Haku…?"

"Hello, I'm Haku!" Haku said as he stepped forward, placing his hands on my shoulders. "You must be Hyuuga Neji-kun, a friend of Chōko-san, Naruto-kun, and Sasuke-kun! I've seen you with them in those pictures."

Haku had been referring to the photo album Naruto had shown him and Zabuza. Neji understood, but still appeared tense around Haku.

"I am indeed their friend…" Neji was trying to stay neutral, but annoyance soon crossed his expression. "And that's Hyuuga-san, to you."

"Oh…okay, Hyuuga-san!" Haku understood. "It's very nice to meet you!"

Neji clicked his tongue. "Likewise…"

At that moment, Naruto popped up in front of Neji and held up the basket he was carrying for the Hyuuga to see. "Hey, hey, look what I have-ttebayo!"

Neji blinked a few times. "What…are those?"
"Fox kits!" Naruto grinned widely. "I saved them while we were in Wave—I'm their parent now, dattebayo! Aren't they cute?"

"Quite…" Neji looked like he didn't know what to make of them. "How long will you be gone?"

"Depending on the weather, it'll take us at least a week to arrive at Kirigakure," Sasuke replied. "Though, according to the Sandaime, our C-rank mission will take us longer than that, so we're looking at an estimate of a few weeks to a month."

"We'll be back, though!" I tried to reassure Neji. "So don't worry—and thank you for the flowers, Neji-san!"

Neji turned his attention back on me and nodded. "You're welcome and…you can call me Neji, if you want. I won't mind…"

Oh, that's a first… "Okay, Neji! And remember what I told you—I'm fine with just Chōko."

"I know, Chōko-san…" Close enough…

"So can I call you, Chōko?" Haku suddenly asked me.

"I don't really mind honorifics, so shoot." Unless the situation calls for it, like say, a disguise of some sort or whatever, I don't mind.

"Very well…Chōko," Haku giggled.

"…" Neji's expression went blank upon hearing Haku say my name. A moment passed before Neji walked forward and pulled me away from Haku. "Chōko-san…just stay safe, okay?"

I blinked once and nodded my head. "Don't worry! Kakashi-sensei says he'll protect us with all his life."

"I did indeed say that and Haku, can you please refrain from touching my student?" Kakashi remarked. "Thank you for that, Neji-san."

"It's nothing…" Neji sighed. "So I guess…I'll be seeing you."

"It seems like it." Kinda sucks, when you think about it… "Hey, cheer up! We won't be gone for that long!"

"I know…just try not to lose any more hair." Oh haha—very funny, Neji!

I resisted the urge to snort and pulled out a sunflower from the bouquet. "Here's a flower for your sense of humor."

Without saying another word, Neji took the flower. He stared at it and nodded his head…then he blinked when Haku handed him a white carnation.

"A parting gift," Haku explained. "I hope we can get to know each other better when we return."

Neji just stared at Haku and said nothing.

"Maa, we should get going, now." Kakashi ran his hand through his hair. "Sorry, Neji-san—I'll make sure these three are completely free for you to visit us when we return."

"I'll keep that in mind…" Neji said.
Neji saw us off, never once leaving the gate until we were out of sight... I assumed. He seemed rather sad to see us go, but I guess I'd be sad if I heard a friend I wanted to meet up left the exact day I returned. Maybe I should treat him to some herring soba when I get back...or should I try making it...decisions, decisions.

The path we were taking to reach the Land of Fire's port was much different from the path to Wave from the exact moment we took a different turn in the road. Kakashi told us it was going to be a long night for all of us, as we weren't going to set up camp at all, during this trip. And he was right...it was a little unsettling to be traveling during the night, what with the lack of lighting of any kind.

Though, with so many people with us, it sure did take a load off my shoulders. I mean, safety in numbers and whatnot. Fuck you horror movie clichés! No one's splitting up under my watch!

As we were mostly traveling in darkness, it made it easier on Naruto when it came to the fox kits, as the kits registered darkness as a time to be asleep. We got a lot farther than we ever did traveling during the day. And thanks to Kakashi's great sense of direction, which was rather precise, we made it to an inn by the time the sun started to rise.

We rested up at the inn, staying only until the sun began to set before leaving. The switch from sleeping at night to day for this was a little jarring for me. It definitely threw us off...well, all of us, save for Kakashi, Zabuza, and Haku. They were quite used to these types of sleeping schedules based on experience.

Meanwhile with Sasuke, he looked about ready to kill anyone who provoked him and Naruto was his usual cheery self, very much occupied with the sleeping fox kits in the basket he carried. Eventually, Naruto is going to need to find an alternative once those kits outgrew the basket.

Also, Haku placed the carnation back in my hair, since I took it off last night to avoid it getting crushed while I was asleep. Yamanaka Flowers cut flowers lasted for quite a while before they started to wither, so that was a definite plus. It certainly made it easier for me to store the sunflowers Neji had given me into a sealing scroll. I'm hoping these flowers last long enough for me to put them in a vase of water when we get back in Konoha...hopefully.

Otherwise, they could make a great distraction when we're on the ship. Yeah, that sounds like a lovely idea. It'll certainly take my mind off the rocking movements of the ship...ugh, I'm seriously not looking forward to that.

We arrived to the port quite early in the morning, where Kakashi left us at an inn while he looked for the captain of the ship who was taking us to Kirigakure. I don't know what everyone else was doing during then, because I conked out minutes after Kakashi had left the inn. I do not wish to sleep on the ship, because apparently, it makes seasickness worse.

Here's to hopefully have a week of good weather. Or whatever will make this trip go any faster, because otherwise, I'm not going to have a good time, at all...

"Ulp...uuuurgh..." I was not having a good time...at all.

I was nauseous, throwing up whatever was in my stomach into a bucket, and it's been only four fucking hours since the ship, the Lapis Lazuli, set sail. The captain of the ship was younger than any
of us had ever expected, but that was mostly due to the fact that the older captain, Kazumi, had passed his title onto his son, Mikuri. Mikuri was a turquoise-haired young man with a dazzling smile. At first glance, he didn't appear to be a reliable captain, but looks could be deceiving. His entire crew thought highly of him and Mikuri had enough experience to prove it.

Not that I was doubting him or anything, as I was too busy having a really bad time. Fucking seasickness—why me?! This is not funny…I mean, I have an affinity for water—I should be immune to crap like this, right? I don't know, but Haku and Zabuza seemed completely fine, as were Sasuke, Naruto, and Kakashi. Really, I am the only one suffering here and it just sucks.

"Blaargh…" Make…it…stop!

This is seriously worse than the boat trip to Wave…and that trip took three hours at max! And to think—it'll take at least a week to get to Kirigakure….why? I can't even go to sleep because that'll just make it worse…

"I asked around and got some medicine, if you need any," Haku told me after returning to our room (which we were sharing, due to the impression everyone had that Haku was female and being the only females, supposedly, it was best for us to share a room), where I was now at, just laying down, hoping it will end. "Do you?"

I stared at Haku from my bed, contemplating whether or not I wanted to get out of bed. For one, the beds were rather comfy, and two, I don't think I should even be walking with how uneasy I was. So I just held out my hand and told Haku to take a water bottle out of my backpack, because anything that could help ease my seasickness would do.

I ended up falling asleep about an hour after taking the medication Haku had handed me, due to how drowsy it had made me. On the bright side, I felt better, so all was well…at least, that's what I thought until I realized how tired I was. The freaking medication had a sedative effect. Bluh…ehhe, I just recalled that a certain Materia-stealing ninja managed to get past her motion sickness via tranquilizers.

Oh man, how the hell did I not make the connection? Well, I guess it's because my problem is more exclusive to boats and ships. I also don't steal things…sorta—the raid doesn't count since the owner was dead! And plus, Gatou was a complete ass, so he deserved death or at least some form of retribution!

"Do you want me to bring you dinner?" Holy shit, was I asleep for that long?

Growl.

I felt my face heat up before I pulled up the covers over my head. I heard Haku giggle before saying he would be back. He left after that, allowing me a moment to myself. I pulled down the covers and glared at my stomach.

"Stupid stomach…" If Sasuke were here, he would have poked me in the forehead for that.

"Muirgh…"

I'm tired…but I'm not sleepy. Ha…this is going to be a loong seven days…

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Day two aboard the Lapis Lazuli, I have reached a new stage of seasickness and that is vertigo. I
cannot even walk without feeling disoriented. I have since clung to the walls for support and taken to viewing the scenery while on deck as a form of distraction. I have no idea if this is working, but it is sure as hell a lot better than staying in bed.

I am not alone, as everyone else is here…well, everyone except the fox kits, since Naruto left them in his room, which he shared with Sasuke. Kakashi and Zabuza are sharing a room, in case you are wondering.

"Look, dattebayo!" Naruto suddenly exclaimed. "It's Iruka-sensei's family!"

Family…oh, the dolphins—wait, are they the same ones?! I wobbled over to the gunwale of the ship and gripped the railing when I looked down. Sure enough, it was Iruka's fami—I mean dolphins, though I wasn't sure if they were the same ones we had freed at Gatou's base…I doubt it. Of course, then Naruto pointed out a scar one of these majestic creatures possessed and it was such a familiar scar that I doubt it could be anything but a coincidence.

"Are these seriously the dolphins from before?" Holy crap, how did they find us?!

"It seems so!" Haku replied.

"I told you that they were Iruka-sensei's family!" Naruto was so ecstatic. "Why else would they follow us-ttebayo?"

"Still not a valid excuse to keep them," Kakashi said without looking up from his book.

"But they're a vital part to the oceans' ecosystem and help regulate the fish population as well as help keep sharks away from the more shallow waters!" Naruto complained.

Kakashi lowered his book and gave Naruto a strange look. "Again, where are you learning these things?"

"Once again, not me…" Oh hell no—that sounded like something out of a book.

"I read-ttebayo," was all Naruto had to say.

"I didn't even know you could read," Zabuza admitted.

Naruto pouted. "Shut up—it took me longer than most, dattebayo!"

Yes, it certainly did. "I was definitely there to help him."

"Wasn't your vision shitty then because you didn't have your glasses?" Sasuke suddenly asked.

"Yes, Sasuke, that's how it was…" Ahh, the good ol' days when I was an extremely shitty reader…I don't miss those days.

And that was pretty much what day two consisted of…Kakashi constantly telling Naruto we weren't keeping the dolphins. It was as amusing as knowing that Kakashi put aside Icha Icha Paradise for this. Never change, Naruto, never change…
Day four aboard the *Lapis Lazuli*, seasickness has yet to subside. Currently sedated thanks to the effect of a medication I had just taken. Reasons why I am not in bed and on the main deck can be summed up as Haku trying to show me something in order to make me feel better.

"I've been meaning to try this out since I've signed a contract, but here goes!" Haku bit his thumb, did the hand seals, and slammed the palm of his right hand onto the floor, as he yelled, "Summoning no Jutsu!"

I had been wondering why Haku had placed a bucket of water in front of himself when he had done that. I found out right after a puff of smoke engulfed the bucket. Once the smoke had cleared up, a tiny sea horse could be seen swimming inside the bucket of water. It was so small…and cute!

"What do you think of Haruka?" Haku asked me afterwards.

"C-Cute!" Oh my gosh, sea horses are so cute and just cute! Ahhh… "I wanna touch it, but I don't want to hurt it…"

"That's your summon?" Naruto had been watching the entire time, as had Sasuke, Kakashi, and Zabuza. "Isn't it small-ttebayo?"

"Haruka is only a child," Haku explained. "I'm sure Haruka will grow bigger like the one that appeared when I had to sign the contract."

"Is that why we needed to get a new table?" Sasuke looked questioningly at Haku.

Haku nodded. "I apologize…"

"Hey, hey—try a bigger one, dattebayo!" Naruto looked eagerly at Haku. "I wanna see how big they can get!"

Haku looked at Naruto for a moment before turning to Haruka, who disappeared in a puff of smoke. "Okay, I'm going to try doing this in the ocean this time…"

Haku walked closer to the gunwale for this. He bit his thumb again and did the standard procedure for the summoning technique and when he slammed his palm onto the floor, we got greeted with a rather terrifying sight of what appeared to be a gigantic blue-skinned monster whose head had just popped out of the water. It was enormous…and due to its size, any little movement it made caused a disturbance in the body of water where it resided. It was also quite horrifying, and it didn't help that the weather added to its appearance.

Captain Mikuri said that it was going to rain today…and it did—right after Haku had summon this Leviathan of a monster! The skies were gray and cloudy, the rain started off as a light drizzle before turning into a heavy downpour. And just then—Haku's summon roared, nearly capsizing the ship as it did. It was like a goddamn nightmare!

"We're gonna fucking die!"

So this is how I die again…because Haku summoned something akin to a kaijuu, much like Godzilla. I certainly lost all feeling in my legs and dropped to my knees, my heart pounding rather rapidly in my chest.

"Send it back!" Zabuza suddenly yelled.

Haku didn't hesitate to do as Zabuza had told him. I was extremely grateful for that…but it was still raining—just not as hard. I wondered if that monster had something to do with the downpour…
"That was awesome, dattebayo!" God dammit, Naruto, we nearly capsized because Haku listened to you!

"Haku—never listen to Naruto again, if it means doing something like that," Kakashi told Haku once we were sure that everything was fine.

"Especially since your summons are sea dragons," Zabuza added.

Is that what they are?! That explains the freaking Leviathan summon!

What a way to find out they exist in this world!

"Please don't do that again…" Sasuke was rather freaked out.

"What happened?!" Mikuri barged out the door, probably to investigate the sudden force that nearly capsized the ship.

"That was me…sorry…" Haku smiled apologetically at Mikuri. "I didn't think my summons could get that big."

Mikuri stared at Haku for a good minute before sighing. "Just don't do it again…wouldn't want this ship to capsize, now would we? That would certainly be a shame…"

Oh, it would…gugh, this trip is seriously doing a number on me…

…

Day seven aboard the Lapis Lazuli, seasickness still sucks. I am more than likely to be seen in a sedated state due to the medication I take for seasickness. Due to the summoning stunt that Haku had pulled, as well as the bad weather that had followed afterward for the next few days, it will take us slightly longer to reach Kirigakure. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to last, but on the bright side, Haku had made me a crown of flowers using the white carnations he had on himself.

And Haruka, the sea horse, was a cute little summon that can blow bubbles. It was certainly enough to brighten my day—almost as much as the sunflowers Neji had given me did. That reminds me…I need to change the water. Don't want them withering away so quickly…

Chapter End Notes

So momohart made a thing and I wanted to say you guys could check it out here.

Oh and for everyone's sake, I'm gonna put up a reference I usually refer to for hanakotoba, which is the Japanese language of flowers. Please refer to it, since you might just find something interesting in this chapter…ahaha. Here you go:
http://7scions.fallenash.com/index.php?topic=32.0

Anyways, my spring break is over, but I don't have classes until Thursday and that's about it for this week, ignoring club activities I have on Friday. This is a pretty good Spring Quarter for me this time around, so hopefully, I can get some more chapters out before then!
So in this chapter, the long awaited Haku and Neji confrontation occurred, a lot of you readers were waiting for that. I certainly had fun with it.

I wonder if anyone got the reference when it came to the captain, because it's there… and the name certainly says a lot. Oh, and fun fact, when it comes to a certain Materia-stealing ninja, Yuffie Kisaragi, I quite like her…she's my favorite FFVII character! ^^

Anyways, I gotta give you guys a complete heads up about the next chapter, I'm gonna be experimenting with multiple POV shifts from differing characters. Expect it to be like You've Got That Wrong, my Dangan Ronpa genderbender, except I'll try to notify a change with a line break, just for convenience…unless you'd rather I'd stick with the You've Got That Wrong-style, which I am more than comfortable to go with. Feel free to leave some feedback.

Speaking of Dangan Ronpa, I was making a direct reference to Saionji Hiyoko, the Super High School Level Traditional Dancer. Guess who got stuck with a kimono that resembles hers? Chōko did, and she is not happy about it, but considering how picky she is with her kimono, it'll have to do until she finds better ones or probably outgrows the Saionji kimono. Oh, and when I brought up Viola, I meant that Viola from the Witch's House. Makes you really wonder how Chōko would have reacted if she were blonde.

So anyways, you have ChibiFoxAI to thank for the fact that Haku has sea dragons as summons and before you can get me for doing mythical creatures as summons, I'm just gonna bring up Danzō's baku, which are also mythical creatures. So yeah, Haku's sea dragons can range from tiny sea horses to giant Leviathan monsters. There is an in between and going by mythology, they're capable. And if you're wondering about how sea horses can be dragons, I'm going for the Fruits Basket explanation and giving you Hatori Sohma.

You also have ChibiFoxAI to thank for the entire dolphins scene and to UnstableFable for Neji's silent annoyance. Suggestions are something I always consider, just so you guys know.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, because I certainly did! So until next time, everyone!
When Naruto walked up to the door to Chōko and Haku's room, he found himself having second thoughts. He had been meaning to talk to Chōko about something that he had been keeping secret for quite some time. Sasuke said it would be fine for him to tell her, but…

"What if she hates me after I tell her?" Naruto furrowed his brow and bit his lip. He had to tell her… it wouldn't be right if he kept it a secret from her. It just wasn't right. Still—he was afraid… so very afraid. "I don't want to lose any of my friends…"

"Naruto…" It was Sasuke. "You don't have to do it alone, dumbass."

Naruto smiled at Sasuke, who smiled back as he grabbed the doorknob and turned it. This ended up surprising Chōko, who had almost fallen asleep.

"Knock first, jackass!" she exclaimed somewhat sluggishly. It was probably the medication.

"Sorry, but…we have something to tell you," Sasuke said. "It's important."

Chōko arched her brow at them but nodded her head and told them to shut the door. "I'm listening…"

"Naruto…" Sasuke had looked at him, Naruto.

Naruto could feel his heart beginning to race when Chōko's gaze fell upon him. She was looking expectantly at him…but he just couldn't find his voice.

"It's okay, Naruto, whatever you have to say, I won't judge!" Chōko's smile was so warm…

Naruto could feel the tears beginning to well up in his eyes. His heart was pounding so hard that he thought it was going to explode. His mouth felt dry and it was almost as though something had gotten stuck in his throat. He had never been so terrified then the day when he learned why everyone always looked at him that way…

"I…" he finally managed to say. "Know why those people…look at me that way."

Chōko blinked. "You…do?"

"This is it…" Naruto thought, inhaling deeply and then exhaling slowly as a way to stay calm. He felt so close to having a panic attack, but seeing Sasuke there at his side reassured him. "I'm…I'm…"

The host of the Kyuubi, the monster that attacked the village on the day he was born… That's what Naruto wanted to say, but nothing came out.

"Naruto…it's okay, whatever you have to say, I won't judge you." Chōko's words sounded so genuine…

Naruto noticed his vision beginning to blur. His cheeks felt wet and his body was trembling. He was so scared, but…Chōko was smiling. She said it was okay… "I'm…the host of the Kyuubi!"
Silence…such terrifying silence.

Naruto didn't know what to do with silence. His chest started to feel tight and when he tried to wipe away the tears, they just kept coming. Just as he started to regret telling Chōko, a pair of arms wrapped themselves around his waist.

"It's not fair…isn't it?" Chōko asked him as she embraced him. "People looking at you like that because of what you contain, instead of looking at the person in front of them."

"Wh…at?" Naruto hadn't been expecting this reaction.

"How long…?" Chōko looked at him. "How long have you known?"

Naruto swallowed hard and shakily replied, "S-S-Since before you found us with Iruka-sensei…"

"Graduation, huh…" Chōko sounded rather sad. "It must have been hard for you, huh? Knowing that, but keeping it to yourself?"

"Sasuke knew-ttebayo…" Iruka also knew, as well as the adults in Konohagakure. "But you didn't…and I was afraid you were going to leave when you found out, dattebayo."

Chōko scoffed. "Dumbass…I told you when I first met you that I wasn't gonna leave. I still won't, okay?"

Those words were like music to his ears… Naruto had never felt so relieved.

"I told you she would be accepting!" Sasuke lightly scolded him. "You shouldn't have been so worked up!"

Naruto knew that, but it still frightened him. And now that he knew that Chōko wouldn't leave…he cried. Just knowing that the very first person who became his friend would stay at his side no matter what was enough to take a huge load off of his shoulders.

"Chōko?" he heard Sasuke say Chōko's name.

"Hmm?" was her response.

"Thank you." Sasuke was smiling that rare, genuine smile of his. The smile he reserved for the moments he felt were worth smiling.

And just looking at him smile, made Naruto want to smile, but not now…Naruto couldn't. Not while he was still crying.

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Haku had been making his way to the kitchen to talk to the cook, who was a light blond-haired young man with mean-looking blue eyes. His name was Zumi and Zumi wasn't like his mean stare appeared, being a rather kind individual who was willing to do his best when it came to the people he was serving.

Knowing that, Haku wanted to know if Zumi could make something that Chōko could easily stomach without her seasickness acting up, as usual. Occasionally, the poor girl had a hard time keeping most food down. It was a sight that Haku wished to stop seeing after some meals—
especially since she was someone who *hated* wasting food.

Zumi was in the middle of peeling potatoes when Haku had entered the kitchen. The blond-haired cook had greeted him, as usual, asking him if he needed anything.

"Do you think you can make some okayu?" Haku looked questioningly at Zumi. "It seems like an easy enough meal for Chōko to keep down."

"How's she doing by the way?" Zumi asked him before grabbing another potato to peel.

"At the moment, she's rather sedated." It was strange seeing the usually energetic girl act so calm and sluggish, especially since her eyes had this dozy-look to them. Of course, that was a side effect the medication had on anyone. It at least did its job and helped Chōko with her seasickness. "But otherwise, she is doing fine for someone suffering from seasickness."

"The poor girl," Zumi sighed. "I'll see what I can do—unless you want to make the okayu yourself. If so, I'll allow you to use the kitchen—which is something I rarely ever do, but I trust you, little lady."

Ah, yes, everyone but those Haku had come with were still under the impression he was female. Haku would have ended the façade by now, but because of it, he was able to stay close to Chōko's side. He liked Chōko…not in a way that would denote a romantic attraction, but just as someone he liked to associate with—though he wouldn't mind liking someone like her. If Zabuza said it was fine, then it was fine.

"*Zabuza-sama knows best!*" Haku thought a smile crossed his face. "I guess I could make okayu for Chōko!"

"You really do care for that little girl," Zumi remarked with a chuckle.

Haku blinked and smiled. "I guess I do."

It was only fair to act this way to the person whom he had exchanged ribbons with…

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If there was one thing Zabuza liked about this entire trip, it was how Kakashi kept reacting to seeing Haku interact with his Genin, Chōko. Chōko was someone that Zabuza felt he could do a better job at training her than Kakashi, but considering the help her family was going to give him and Haku—Zabuza could push aside his desire to take the little girl under his wing. For now, he was content watching Haku interact with Chōko.

"Oi, tell your kid to stop acting so intimately with my Genin…" And there was Kakashi, back from spying on Haku.

"What'd he do this time?" Zabuza found himself asking as he lounged about lazily on his bed.

"He's making food for Chōko." Kakashi seemed rather annoyed. He even sounded irritated.

Zabuza felt like laughing, but expressed his amusement through a quiet chuckle. "Surprised it took him that long to start cooking for her. I'd say they'll make a great couple, don't you think?"

"No." Kakashi was against it, and Zabuza knew, but Zabuza also knew that Kakashi
"How familiar are you with some of Kirigakure's customs?" Zabuza asked the silver-haired Jounin.

"Enough to know that they're the reason Kirigakure has a reputation its accidental marriages..." So Kakashi was informed—how interesting... "Especially when foreigners are involved, due to their lacking knowledge on local customs..."

"Oh good, then I guess you must already know what happened between Haku and your Genin." Zabuza felt himself grin as he placed his arms behind the back of his head, his attention now focused on the ceiling. "Ha, didn't think that ribbon would have done it—"

Within seconds, Zabuza found himself eye to eye with Kakashi, who was holding him by the collar of his shirt.

"What. Do. You. Mean?" Kakashi narrowed his right eye at the missing-nin.

Zabuza grinned widely, his jagged teeth very much exposed. "Oh, so you're not that much informed, huh? Let me fill you in, then...the day your Genin got her ribbon back was the day she also gave Haku a ribbon. The two of them helped each other tie the ribbon into the other's hair...quite the intimate interaction, don't you think?"

"Keep talking, now..." Kakashi's tone was rather dark.

Zabuza had never seen the silver-haired Jounin act this riled up over something so simple. "So as I was saying—the day that happened was the day the two of got engaged, since the ribbons count as the two of them exchanging items where personal value is of consideration. As far as customs go in Kirigakure, they're as good as engaged."

"What?" Oh, so did Kakashi just find out?

Zabuza chuckled. "Haku really did cherish that ribbon I gave him."

"That belonged to Chōko..." Kakashi reiterated. "Which you took from her when you cut off her hair!"

"Ah, details..." Zabuza didn't really care. "Kirigakure doesn't really need them when love is involved."

"Bullshit," Kakashi spat. "Haku doesn't even look at Chōko in that way."

"No...but whatever I say does go." That was one thing that was absolute. "And I approve of her... and Haku wouldn't mind someone like the little spitfire, that's for damn sure."

Kakashi stared at Zabuza for a couple of minutes before releasing him not-too-gently. Zabuza nearly bumped his head against the railing of his bed, had he not been prepared for Kakashi's actions. Normally, Zabuza wouldn't really allow anyone to treat him in such a manner, but it was part of the amusement factor that came from Kakashi's reactions.

Zabuza's attention quickly focused back on Kakashi, who was about ready to make his way out of the room. "Where're you goin'?"

"Going to get rid of a ribbon..." Kakashi said as he opened the door.

"That won't do any good," Zabuza decided to inform Kakashi. "As their actions are legally
binding…the only way out of it is if you can get the Godaime Mizukage to break it off. You're quite lucky that Haku isn't of age, in civilian terms, otherwise the two would have been considered married."

Kakashi slammed the door upon hearing that. "You made him do this…"

"Don't blame me for your Genin's naivety." It was all on her for ignoring the context of her actions. "I suggest you give your students a crash course in Kirigakure customs and to start it off, tell the Uchiha to lose his clan symbol—it'll make him a huge target for those who still hold grudges against those with kekkei genkai."

"I already have some of my old clothes when I was his age for him to wear," Kakashi was quick to say.

"And you don't trust him to carry his own set of clothes?" Zabuza was rather intrigued with this idea.

Kakashi looked blankly at him. "Sasuke is too attached to whatever was left of his clan to suddenly stop wearing his clan's symbol without help."

"Wow, no wonder that other brat wanted to call you his father…you are like one to your team." Zabuza could respect that.

"I was hoping to come off as an older brother, but I guess a father wouldn't be too bad…" Kakashi didn't seem too content with this.

"Still having Daddy issues?" Zabuza teased before catching a kunai in midair that Kakashi had finished throwing at him.

"Fuck off." And that was Zabuza's cue to drop the subject entirely.

Zabuza may have been the Demon of the Mist, but he knew better than to deliberately rub salt into the wounds of a highly skilled shinobi. Plus, there was a limit to being a complete dick. While Zabuza enjoyed getting a kick out of screwing with people and he was a sadist, he still preferred to keep his usual personality out of the interactions he had with people who were trying to help him. It was only fair, as they were helping him and it would be foolhardy to take such help for granted.

"Note to self: Refrain from mentioning Hatake Sakumo in any shape or form…" Zabuza thought to himself.

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Kakashi did not like how Haku was interacting with Chōko. He certainly did not like how the boy had given the Akimichi a bowl of okayu while everyone else dined on curry in the dining room. He might have been slightly amused to see Chōko a little disappointed, but understanding why okayu would have been a better meal for her.

He also didn't like how the ribbons in their hair made them match. Of course—as he had learned from Zabuza—Kakashi couldn't do a damn thing about it just yet until they met the Mizukage. They were currently ten days into this trip, and Captain Mikuri said that they should be reaching Kirigakure by tomorrow.

Kakashi had no idea how Chōko would have reacted to knowing her actions got her engaged. For
that very reason, he hoped she stayed uniformed of it until after this mess was cleared up. It helped that Haku was being rather subtle about it, but at the same time, it was that subtle nature of Haku's that irritated Kakashi.

"I guess Zabuza was right about one thing..." Kakashi needed to give his Genin a crash course in Kirigakure's customs—or just keep them on a tighter leash. That sounded like a better idea then telling them in an overtly complicated manner of what made Kirigakure the hidden village with the most accidental marriages. They had too many damn customs for their own good...

It was rather ironic, in the sense of how violent Kirigakure was. Though, Kakashi wasn't in the mood for irony. It's what got him in this mess.

And there was Zabuza giving Haku an approving look for his actions... Kakashi truly hated the man—or at least, was irritated by him. Kakashi was at least glad that Zabuza had ceased trying to make Chōko his student, though the outcome of this was aforementioned engagement.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire..." Kakashi should have really seen it coming. He really should have, but he didn't and Zabuza got a huge kick out of that. Sometimes, Kakashi wondered if life was punishing him for his past actions. As if he didn't suffer enough, though, with Naruto's persistent pleading to take Iruka's family, the dolphins they had saved, back home with them... It could have been worse, but Kakashi still wished it hadn't happened in the first place.

And he really wished Naruto would just drop the entire subject about Iruka's family. It made him wonder if he should tell Iruka about this... Kakashi already had to explain to the Chuunin about how Naruto became the parent of nine fox kits—of whom were looking more colorful with each passing day.

"I wonder when they'll start naming the rest of them..." Kakashi allowed himself to think. "Where are they going to sleep once they outgrow the basket?"

So many questions, so little time...that's how it felt for Kakashi and he really didn't like how Haku was helping Chōko to their room. Barely engaged and Haku was already trying to act like the perfect husband.

"I'm keeping my eye on you, you little shit..." Kakashi resisted the urge to allow his Killing Intent to show through.

It was tough being a Jounin instructor sometimes...

...Come the next day, shortly after disembarking early in the morning, Kakashi was keeping a close on each and every one of his cute Genin, telling them to stay by his side, lest they accidentally get themselves engaged, like poor, oblivious Chōko.

"In hindsight, I should really have someone inform them of Kirigakure's customs..." For his sake and sanity, Kakashi hoped it would prevent another accidental engagement (how lucky he was that Haku was legally a civilian). For now, he'll just have to endure watching Haku act like the perfect husband he was trying to pass off as to Chōko, even though she still had no idea of what she had gotten herself into.

Kirigakure appeared dark and gloomy—a huge contrast to the bright and cheery Konohagakure. The mist this time of the day was more of a thick, white fog that practically obscured their vision. To Zabuza and Haku, it was a familiar sight...probably. It was their home, though Haku was originally
born into a snowy village located somewhere in the Land of Water before Kirigakure became his home after Zabuza had found him.

"Heh, the black-haired brat kinda looks like you in those clothes," Zabuza made a comment about Sasuke's current attire, which consisted of Kakashi's outfit from when he was the Uchiha's age.

Sasuke wasn't exactly in a good mood, Kakashi could tell, so his response was rather predictable. "Shut up, Mochi!"

Ah, Mochi…Zabuza's name for his civilian disguise—it was the only one that stuck with Zabuza because he refused to go by Momo. Kakashi still found it amusing…but not as amusing over the fact that Zabuza absolutely hated wearing a shirt. Zabuza also hated showing his face, but Kakashi could relate to that… In fact, Kakashi greatly disliked being photographed without his mask on.

"Speaking of photographs, we still haven't taken another team photo..." Kakashi needed to fix that the minute they returned Konoha. For now, he had an engagement to break off.

On the bright side, since Chōko was finally off the ship and had no need to take medication, she was back to her usual self. Well...as much of her usual self she could be in such dense fog. The fog's moisture was building up on her glasses, making it difficult for her to see. Kakashi had been expecting her to ask him for help, but then Haku tried to do it for him.

Kakashi could tolerate the boy bringing Chōko medication for her seasickness. He still had mixed feelings over the fact that they were sharing rooms on the ship. And then there was making her food, which was one thing, but watching Haku holding his hand out to take the glasses Chōko was passing him was where Kakashi drew the line.

"I'll watch over those for you." Kakashi didn't even hesitate to get in between the supposed lovebirds, as Zabuza had referred to them a few times (most likely to annoy him). He grabbed onto the glasses and pocketed them, leaving Chōko perplexed and Haku slightly miffed.

It was subtle, but an expression of irritation was definitely on Haku's face, even though he tried to keep it secret. Kakashi considered it an accomplishment of some sort.

As the fog started to clear up into mist, it gave everyone a better look at Kirigakure as a whole. There were certainly lot of trees and tall, cylindrical buildings. Though, with mountains in the distance, the cylindrical buildings almost blended in, looking similar to mountains themselves in the distance, with help from the mist.

It was around this time that people began to populate the previously empty streets. They ignored the group for the most part until the Konohagakure hitai-ate caught their attentions. From there, whispers could be heard and Kakashi could practically feel each and every one of theirs stares on them. A few times, a Kirigakure shinobi confronted them about their reasons for being in their villages—some might have even asked to take a look at the basket of kits Naruto carried in one hand. It was there that all it took was a flash of their badges, and the shinobi would go on their way.

"Are they always like this?" Kakashi found himself asking Zabuza.

"Not that I recall," Zabuza replied. "Though, this could be a safety protocol as a new Mizukage can warrant observations from other hidden villages."

"That sounds like a reasonable action," Chōko piped up as she adjusted her glasses. "You did say that the Yondaime Mizukage, Yagura, had the appearance of a child."

"He was also quite young when he became Mizukage," Zabuza added. "Barely even sixteen and he
still held the appearance of a child."

"Sixteen?!” Naruto was stunned. "Hey, hey, Kakashi-sensei—does that mean I can also become Hokage at a young age-ttebayo?!”

And there Naruto went again… "You have to become a Jounin, Naruto, before you can become the Hokage."

That was how it usually went in Konohagakure. And before Naruto could become a Jounin, he had to become a Chuunin, and to become a Chuunin, Naruto needed to pass the Chuunin Exams. Speaking of which, Kakashi was counting down the days before the Sandaime gave word of when the next Chuunin exams was going to take place. Kakashi was quite prepared to volunteer his students, who he felt were ready.

Though, before that, he considered telling Chōko about the truth of her accidental kills… Then Kakashi promptly remembered her freak-out when she thought she had killed Haku.

"One day, maybe—but not yet…” Kakashi worried dearly for his each of his Genin's mental health. "I should reserve a session with Inoichi-san when I tell her…”

That sounded like a rather good idea.

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It took them an entire hour to reach the Mizukage's office. The building was by far the largest and widest out of every other building in Kirigakure. The higher they got with each step they took to reach the Mizukage's office, the more Kakashi was able to make out the sea of trees and foliage that made everything blend in so well. At first glance, it was almost as if Kirigakure was a city made out of ruins.

"Whoa!” And that was the sound of his Genin, Chōko, getting herself into trouble. It really happened all too quick for anyone to do anything. One minute, Chōko seemed fine, the next, she slipped on a step and landed on her right cheek after falling landing on the stone-hard steps she had just finished slipping on, thanks to the mist leaving them somewhat slippery.

Nobody moved, not even Haku (much to Kakashi's relief). A moment passed before Chōko managed to lift her face off the ground, showing that she was fine…until she spat out a tooth into the palm of her hand. She seemed a little dazed, but mostly fine. Still—that didn't make Kakashi worry any less.

"Are you okay, Chōko?" Kakashi hoped it wasn't her permanent tooth that had fallen out.

"Imma fine…bleh…" Chōko spat out. "Jus' a baby tooth—a molar, at that…”

"Your cheek's not looking too good, though," Zabuza remarked, referring to the nasty bruise that was quickly forming on Chōko's cheek.

"I can heal it," Sasuke was quick to say.

What happened next caught everyone off-guard as Haku forcefully pushed Sasuke toward Chōko and said, "Heal her…now."

"Has anyone seen my glasses?” Of course, the fall had caused Chōko's glasses to fall off...

Thankfully, Naruto was quick to give them to Chōko. As he did this, he also said, "If you put your
tooth under the pillow, the tooth-collecting shinobi will replace it with money, dattebayo!"

Chōko stared long and hard at Naruto before exclaimed, "That exists?!!"

Kakashi felt like face-palming there and then. The only reason this came to be was because Naruto had lost a tooth while hanging out with Shisui and freaked out rather badly about it that it took a made-up explanation about a tooth-collecting shinobi and money to make him stop crying. Kakashi could only wonder how Shisui did not tell the other children this or how long it took for Naruto to bring it up with the others for this to have happened. Right now, he could probably only ask,

"Why?"

Right now, Shisui was probably laughing at Kakashi from the afterlife, like the little shit he was. In fact—it was all thanks to the Uchiha that Kakashi had to play along with the idea that he had introduced to Naruto, because he didn't wish for the blond to find out Shisui had been lying.

Five years…almost five years, and Kakashi had a small jar of teeth hidden in a sealing scroll somewhere—one that he hoped Naruto would never find, lest the blond find out the truth. He had never been so glad to find out that Naruto had lost all of his baby teeth…

Sasuke was at least kind enough to play along and now, Kakashi most likely had to inform Chōko about it to prevent the truth from coming out. The same went with Zabuza and Haku, though, judging by reaction Zabuza had from the look Kakashi had given him, the missing-nin most likely got the message.

"I should also consider reserving a session with Inoichi-san for Naruto…" Kakashi truly did worry for his Genin.

It didn't take them that long to reach the Mizukage after that. The group was escorted into the Mizukage's office by a blue-haired, eye-patch-wearing Jounin by the name of Ao. And it was shortly after meeting the one and only Terumī Mei that Kakashi really regretted not staying by Chōko's side.

"Wow, you look pretty young for a Kage." Kakashi was quite aware that Chōko probably said what she had said without even thinking about it. Normally, Kakashi would agree, except for the fact that Zabuza had confirmed that the Yondaime Mizukage held the appearance of a child. Anyone would probably look older than Yagura, and yet, Chōko made such a comment that Kakashi really hoped that Mei wouldn't take it the wrong way.

However, Mei seemed rather stunned, her green eyes focused on Chōko. The auburn-haired woman stared at Chōko for a whole minute before looking at Ao, and saying, "Ao, you've been replaced."

Kakashi almost felt bad for Ao…almost, except for the fact that the Godaime Mizukage was now looking at Chōko with an expression that seemed to have made the Akimichi panic.

"Did I say that out loud?!" Kakashi wasn't even surprised to hear Chōko say that. "Uh, uhhh… you're gorgeous!"

Kakashi found himself looking at Mei after hearing his Genin say that. Mei was rather beautiful and possessed an impressive figure. He could see where Chōko was going at—he just wished she kept her mouth shut, since she was in a hidden village known for its peculiarly long list of customs when it came to marriage, of which had gotten quite a number of foreign shinobi and civilians married.

"You're not so bad yourself, hmm-hmm!" Mei flipped her long, auburn hair and winked at Chōko.

Chōko's face went completely red before she hid it behind her scarf. It was at that moment that Haku
pulled out a white carnation and placed it in Chōko's hair.

"Ah, Godaime Mizukage-sama?" Haku suddenly spoke. "Would you like a white carnation?"

Mei turned her attention away from Chōko and looked at Haku, who held out another white carnation. Mei blinked and then looked back at Chōko, most likely having noticed the white carnation in her hair. She huffed and sighed, shrugging afterwards.

"If only you were a little older—then maybe we could have had something…” Kakashi really didn't like the sound of that.

"Chōko, you should really know when to keep quiet," Sasuke scolded Chōko, who was still hiding her face behind her scarf.

"You know how Chōko-chan gets around people who are pretty," Naruto remarked. "It's not her fault she's speaking the truth-ttebayo."

Oh god, now Naruto was doing it as well.

"My, it must be my lucky day to hear so many compliments." Mei seemed pleased. "Konohagakure sure knows how to make a lady feel good about herself…if only Ao was the same."

"Godaime…!" Ao looked strained.

"Well, let's get back to business, shall we?" Mei smiled sweetly at them.

Kakashi felt a small bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face. He honestly felt a sort of pressure on him that was unfamiliar to him. "Is this what it means to be in a village where engagement is literally around the corner?"

"Ao, why don't you take these four to your students so they could give them a tour around Kirigakure?" Mei asked Ao, having referred to Haku, Naruto, Sasuke, and Chōko. "I'm sure it would do Chōjūrō and Suigetsu some good to have something to do while we speak privately about certain matters."

Ao looked about ready to question Mei, but all it took was a smile that was hiding a stern look and Ao did as he was told. Once Ao had left the room with Haku, Naruto, Sasuke, and Chōko, Zabuza decided to speak.

"As deadly as ever, aren't we, Mei?" Zabuza chuckled.

"How else did you think I made Godaime?" Mei giggled. "Despite the circumstances that you are here for, I would like to take a moment to say that it is good to see you again, Zabuza."

"Likewise." Zabuza had dispelled the transformation to give Mei a smile showing his jagged teeth.

"You have such a cute face and smile—I never knew why you had to hide them behind bandages." Mei crossed her arms.

"Preference," Zabuza simply said.

Kakashi honestly had no idea what he was witnessing…were Mei and Zabuza really flirting—even though Zabuza was still a missing-nin? "I don't mean to be rude, but shouldn't we be talking about Zabuza's pardon?"

Mei blinked and turned her attention to Kakashi. "Oh, no…you're right. I apologize, but let me just
ask—are you also hiding a cute face behind that mask like Zabuza?"

The effortless way she had said that had made Kakashi blush…a blush that was thankfully hidden behind his mask. This was why he preferred to wear a mask at all times…

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Terumī Mei was someone who quite enjoyed what she did for the most part. Flirting was one of them and the reactions she evoked from the people she flirted with were what made it all the more fun to continue. The little girl with the glasses was someone who reminded her a bit of Chōjūrō, in the sense of how nervous she could get. And much like him, Mei appreciated the way the girl had acted toward her…

It was a shame that the little girl was already engaged to the boy who had placed a white carnation in her hair. Haku certainly picked a nice person and he very well deserved to have someone like her after what had happened to him, due to his genetics granting him with a kekkei genkai during a time of terror. Even now, Mei felt as though she should keep Haku in Kirigakure, though she knew that Haku was better off in Konohagakure, where he would feel wanted.

Attitudes take time to change and while Yagura wasn't truly to blame for his actions as the Yondaime Mizukage, Mei still had a huge mess to clean up. That is why she chose to pardon Zabuza when the request had come from Konohagakure. At the same time, feelings for the friend she had made during her Academy days still lingered, so that could have helped curb her decision. That still didn't make Mei feel any less confident about her choice.

Considering how long the Sandaime Hokage had mentioned he had been trying to contact Kirigakure, Mei felt this was a great way to strengthen ties between this hidden village and Konoha.

"Apart from my pardon, which you have received, is there anything else you wish to talk to me about?" Maybe a question in regards to having dinner with the silver-haired Jounin, Mei hoped. "Oh, and where are my manners? I am Terumī Mei, Godaime Mizukage…and you?"

The silver-haired Jounin coughed and calmly replied, "Hatake Kakashi—the Sandaime also gave a message to give to you."

Mei arched her brow at Kakashi. "Hmm, and what could that be?"

Kakashi walked over to Mei and handed her a scroll. Mei didn't hesitate to open it and look at its contents. Her left eye scanned the message, her interest very much piqued after seeing what she had read.

"Ah, so that's what it is…" Mei was certainly intrigued and definitely felt like responding to the message she had been given. Just not at the moment, as she was still busy. Mei closed the scroll and turned her attention back to the two men standing in front of her desk. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes, it's about Haku and my Genin, Chōko…" Kakashi seemed rather strained.

"Oh, the glasses-wearing girl?" What a cute name, Mei couldn't help but think to herself. "Ah, such a lucky girl she is! Congrats on the happy couple, by the way. I'm sure you raised a fine child, Zabuza!"

Zabuza certainly looked proud. "He definitely picked someone with such potential—she has an
affinity for water, by the way."

"A water affinity—in the Land of Fire?" Mei questioned. "How ironic…it's almost as ironic as having a fire affinity in the Land of Water."

Not that Mei would know anything of such…maybe.

"She also managed to kill two Chuunin, Gōzu and Meizu." Zabuza grinned.

"Ah, yes, I've heard of the Demon Brothers' demise—I just never expected the person to be her…" Mei was certainly surprised.

"Do not mention that around her just yet," Kakashi suddenly said. "I have no idea how she'll response—she freaked out enough when she thought she had killed Haku."

"Oh, first kill?" Mei knew how that felt…her first kill had been during her Academy's brutal graduation ritual. Even though she still resented Zabuza's actions, she was quite thankful the practice was put to an end after he had slaughtered a graduating class. It was such a shame it had to be done under such circumstances, though…

"Konohagakure sure raises a lot of softies, though…" Zabuza sighed.

"They seemed fine to me." Mei tried to seem subtle with her intent to keep Zabuza from saying anything else he would regret saying around her. "Try to be a little open-minded, okay?"

That definitely silenced Zabuza.

"Anyways, you were talking about Haku and Chōko's engagement?" Mei decided to bring them back to the subject Kakashi had brought up. "What about them?"

"Could you please break it off?" Kakashi asked.

Mei blinked and tilted her head to the side. "Why should I do that?"

Marriage was something considered quite the goal in Kirigakure, with how short life could be at times. It was a form of happiness that kept people going during the time of Yagura's reign. It was something that Mei wished to have herself, but had no such luck in just yet.

"Soon...hopefully today—or maybe tomorrow." Mei could only hope…

"Excuse me?" Kakashi seemed surprised.

"There are a certain set of conditions that must be fulfilled in order for a marriage or engagement to be broken off." Mei was very well acquainted with such, as well as the customs that had gotten people engaged and married in this hidden village. "Unless you explain the reasons, I cannot break it off."

"Chōko isn't even aware she's engaged!" Kakashi exclaimed.

"And…?" Mei needed more reasons to cancel off an engagement.

"Haku doesn't see her in that way either!" Kakashi added.

"But he wouldn't mind it, though," Zabuza brought up. "And the girl seems to like him enough—she certainly thinks he's gorgeous."
"Ha~, she certainly has perfect sight, for someone who wears glasses." Mei smiled, still feeling rather content with the words the glasses-wearing girl had told her.

Kakashi seemed exasperated at this point, though Mei still had no idea why. He should be happy for his Genin. "Why does Kirigakure have so many customs, anyways?"

Mei giggled. "When was the last time you have ever seen a Kiri-nin act so intimate in regards to romance?"

"…" Kakashi said nothing but just stared at her.

"Flirting is an entirely different thing." Flirting was a good way to show interest, but never a good way to get married to someone else. Otherwise, Mei wouldn't still be single. "In any case, I cannot break off the engagement…so what was it exactly that brought them together?"

Mei was curious.

"They exchanged ribbons, which, to them, were items of personal value," Zabuza replied.

"Aww, how sweet!" Mei could only hope her own engagement or marriage was just as endearing.

"Haku had tried giving Chōko a ring, but someone had to steal the ring…" Zabuza looked sternly at Kakashi.

"It fit me—I don't see any complaints about preventing Chōko from getting a ring that didn't fit her," Kakashi said nonchalantly.

"Oh…oh dear…" Mei really had bad luck in having her eye on certain men, but before that, she had to confirm something. "Did you put it on your left ring finger?"

"I did, actually…perfect fit," Kakashi answered with a straight face. "What seems to be the problem?"

"And how old are you?" Mei crossed her arms.

"I'm turning twenty-seven this year." Kakashi didn't even blink an eye.

Well, damn… "According to Kirigakure customs, since you took a ring meant to tie someone else together and placed it on your ring finger, confirming such an action…you and Zabuza are married."

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"What?" Kakashi's tone was so flat.

"You gotta be fucking with me!" Zabuza's eyes were wide from shock.

"Since Haku is still considered a minor in civilian terms, and Kakashi is much older than him by at least six years, such a custom would fall under Haku's guardian," Mei explained as if it were obvious. "Which shouldn't have been an issue, had he not been single…"

It was how some children managed to get their single parents married or remarried in this hidden village, with a match-up where the child approved of someone who could very well take care of them and their guardian. It certainly brought an end to some sexual tension that existed between couples that couldn't spit it out…

"Wouldn't want someone so young getting married to someone much older, now would we?" That
still didn't stop some people from trying, much to Mei's annoyance.

"…" Kakashi was certainly quiet this time around.

"You just had to put the ring on your finger, didn't you?" Zabuza looked so pissed.

"I wasn't going to let my Genin get engaged!" Kakashi snapped.

"You know what—fuck this!" Zabuza exclaimed. "Mei, how do we break this off?"

Mei pouted... she had never seen such negativity toward marriage—except for people who weren't interested in love, which was something she could respect and take into consideration when breaking off engagements and marriages they wanted nothing to do with. The same could be said with incompatible orientation, which Mei had encountered more than one toward people who just couldn't understand why they were incompatible with the other, even though it was obvious. Sometimes, people happened to be a little too forceful... and that was Mei putting it lightly.

When it came to Kakashi and Zabuza, they definitely had potential, but at the same time, they seemed better off as friends of the vitriolic sort.

Mei sighed and decided to tell them a detail they haven't really noticed just yet. "If you're really interested, then you should know that these customs only apply to the people of Kirigakure. So long as one person is from this village, these customs apply."

The same went with every other hidden village, such as Iwagakure and Kumogakure.

"In your case, Zabuza, you are switching villages, so until that happens, you two are stuck with each other—unless you'd prefer to get divorced, then I'll get the paperwork out." Because Mei always had an extra set on hand for such situations—it was surprisingly more common than one would think. "But I suggest you wait until you get back to Konohagakure, which is when the marriage will be completely nullified—almost as if it had never happened. It will certainly keep you, Kakashi, from getting engaged or married to anyone else in Kirigakure while you are here."

One of the perks these situations bring is immunity to Kirigakure's customs.

"Really, now, Zabuza, you ought to know about stuff like this." Mei sighed.

"All I had was you as a reference for such things growing up!" Zabuza scowled.

Mei giggled. "That is true... say, would you like to meet Yagura? I'm sure you would like to meet with the person who took you in when you were only three years old."

When Zabuza was three years old, he had run away from home and was roaming the streets when Yagura had found him. He had absolutely no reason to pay any attention to some random child and yet... Yagura still took notice and took Zabuza in when no one else bothered to even look in his direction. It's because of this that Mei isn't at all surprised to see a sudden change in Zabuza's demeanor upon mentioning Yagura's name.

Zabuza stiffened. "Is he... here?"

"He's still recovering, but the medic-nin say he should be out of the hospital by next month." Mei felt herself smile when she saw a certain look of longing in Zabuza's eyes. "Would you like me to take you to him? I'm sure he would like to meet you."

"I tried to kill him... I doubt he'd want to see my face." Zabuza laughed weakly.
Mei looked sympathetically at Zabuza. "Oh, Zabuza…I have some news for you. Kakashi…would you mind taking some notes to bring to your Sandaime?"

"Not at all," Kakashi responded.

"Very well…" Mei stood up from her seat and walked out. "Follow me—I'll take you to the Yondaime."

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Sunflower: Love and Respect

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White Carnation: Engaged to be married/Our love endures

Chapter End Notes

Credit goes to Leafy365, for the "Ao, you've been replaced." line. Anyways, I hope everyone remembers that I'm quite open-minded, so do not be too surprised about some of the content in this chapter. To the people who have referred to the hanakotoba reference to find out the last chapter's A/N, kudos! To everyone else, I hope you understand now and let me just say, in Neji's case, he might have had a little help from Ino.

Anyways, the entire concept of Kirigakure's many customs in regards to engagements and marriages all stem from Mei's obsession with marriage and her flirtatious nature. I decided to give an explanation on how she would be so intrigued with it and why she would get annoyed if anyone insinuates that she is past marriageable age. It also reflects a bit of irony, considering how much of a violent reputation Kirigakure has, and yet, look at their customs of getting married and engaged—certainly doesn't match up, one would think, as fighting to near death surely seems like something fitting for Kirigakure.

Of course, that is how it is and pretty much, it's what got Kakashi accidentally hitched to Zabuza, because these customs are unisex. This is why people are extremely wary of entering Kirigakure, because if you aren't wary of the customs, that could be you getting accidentally married or engaged to someone. And let me just say it isn't Kiri exclusive, as Iwa and Kumo have their own customs, it's just that Kiri has quite a number of them.

So yeah, Haku and Chōko are engaged…but only until they return to Konoha, which is when the engagement is completely nullified. That aside, I hope everyone likes the mental image of Sasuke wearing Young Kakashi's clothes, because that is what he is wearing in this chapter for Kirigakure! I wonder if there is any fan art of this, because I know have a might need… Oh, and Naruto finally told Chōko about his Jinchuuriki status and Chōko being who she is wouldn't have rejected him, because has already known about for quite a long-time now.
I had fun with these multiple perspectives and I was hoping for a You've Got That Wrong approach, but this happened and I'm fine with it, since it has a rather consecutive flow to it.

You can consider this a world-building chapter, because it technically is one, as in Konoha, you have to be a Jounin to become Hokage. The requirements to become a Kage vary from village to village, by the way. Oh, and I hope everyone enjoys the mention of certain characters who shall be making early appearances.

And Mei was a fun character to write from her perspective. And in case anyone didn't get what Mei had been implying when she had asked Zabuza about Yagura, she was referring to the fact that Yagura wasn't just someone Zabuza knew…Yagura was someone who had raised Zabuza.

Yagura is someone who is still alive and being alive, he able to confirm things that had happened while he was Mizukage, of which Mei is going to tell Zabuza and Kakashi, of whom is going to bring back a message to Hiruzen, the Sandaime. Things are happening, that's all I'm saying.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter—I'm posting it up on the day I have 10 AM classes, just for you guys! So no April Fool's jokes for you, so until next time everyone!
Suigetsu

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You know, I am honestly amazed at how much Sasuke resembles Young Kakashi in those clothes—mask and all. It was almost enough to make me forget about my encounter with the Godaime Mizukage, Mei. Holy shit was that embarrassing—I wasn't expecting her to say that! Oh god, I don't think I'll ever be able to look at Mei the same way, ever again...

"So what's in the basket?" I heard Ao ask Naruto.

"Fox kits-ttebayo!" Naruto sounded so proud.

"Uh-huh..." And Ao couldn't even.

"Naruto, calm down," Sasuke told Naruto. "You're scaring Ao."

"You know, I'd prefer it if you referred to me as Ao-san..." Ao coughed.

"Hn," was Sasuke's response.

"Sasuke-kun, be nice!" Haku lightly nudged Sasuke, barely avoiding a swipe from him a moment afterwards.

Ao was probably someone who had better things to do than escort a group of children to his students. Then again, what he was doing with Mei didn't seem to be any better...

"Just so you know, she's like that toward anyone who catches her interest," Ao suddenly said to me.

I blinked a few times, having lost my train of thought due to Ao. "Wha...?"

"You sound jealous." Sasuke certainly seemed amused.

Ao ignored Sasuke and said nothing after that. He continued taking us through Kirigakure's streets, which were rather busy at the time. We did receive a few stares from people, due to our Konoha hitai-ate, but seeing us along with Ao was enough to keep anyone from approaching us, as some shinobi had done earlier.

Eventually, Ao brought us to one of Kirigakure's training grounds (what number, I'm not even gonna bother asking), where we found a white-haired boy counting out loudly the number of push-ups a glasses-wearing boy with tufty, blue hair was doing. So far, from the looks of it, the glasses-wearing boy was having a hard time, his face red and his arms starting to wobble with each push-up he did. The white-haired boy didn't show any mercy and kept urging the glasses-wearing boy to continue.

"You'll never be able to properly wield the Hiramekarei if you don't have the upper-body strength for it!" the white-haired boy barked. "Now give me another hundred!"

Thud!

And there went the glasses-wearing boy, flopping down onto the ground in response to the white-haired boy's demand. The white-haired boy growled and was about ready to kick the glasses-wearing boy in the side when Ao suddenly approached them.
"Suigetsu, are you pushing Chōjūrō past his limits again?" Ao looked sternly at Suigetsu.

"No." Suigetsu tried to look innocent, but then Chōjūrō lifted his head off the ground and said, "He's been making me do push-up since you left us here to train…"

Ao pinched the bridge of his nose. "Chōjūrō, you really shouldn't let someone much younger than you are boss you around."

"You know, it's rather ironic, coming from you," Suigetsu remarked.

Damn, Ao just does not get any respect. Of course, a second after Suigetsu had said that, Ao tried to hit him over the head, only to come into contact with water—what the fuck?!

"Holy shit!" Suigetsu's head just went through a phase transition and went from solid to liquid —how?! Is he made out of ice?!

"Whoa!" Naruto seemed rather impressed by it.
Sasuke just stayed silent.

And Haku at least had an explanation for what we had just seen. "He must be from the Hōzuki clan. The clan is known for using a technique that either liquefies or solidifies their form at will."

It was shortly after Haku had said this that Suigetsu's head returned to its original form. Having heard us, Suigetsu's almond-shaped purple eyes focused immediately on us.

"Who the hell are they?" Suigetsu asked Ao.

"Visitors from Konohagakure, but more importantly, guess who is playing tour guide today?" Ao seemed to enjoy the annoyed look on Suigetsu's face. "You should be honored—the Godaime requested you two, specifically."

Why do I get a faint sense of déjà vu from this?

…
Oh, babysitting…right.

Well, that's flattering...

"Um…can someone help me up?" Chōjūrō asked. "I don't think I can get up on my own…"

Ao looked down at Chōjūrō and shook his head. "Chōjūrō, you need to be more assertive about yourself."

"I know…" Chōjūrō sheepishly said as Ao helped him stand up. "Sorry…"

"I apologize for what you had to witness—they're normally better than that," Ao explained as he brought Suigetsu and Chōjūrō closer to himself. "Anyways, these two are my students—Chōjūrō and Hōzuki Suigetsu. They'll be guiding you around Kirigakure."

"I'd feel a lot better if I knew who they were!" Suigetsu exclaimed as he pushed himself away from Ao. "So who the hell are you?!!"

Wow, he's rude—oh, I know who he is now! He's that one guy from Team Hebi and…well, I certainly don't remember him being this short. Of course, this is like three years before the events
of *Naruto Shippuden*—how old is Suigetsu? Man, this is seriously treading information I know jack shit about…

Wait, is he looking at me—crap! "I'm Akimichi Chōko!"

Could I be any louder?

"Uzumaki Naruto!" Never mind, looks like Naruto just beat me in loudness…

"…Sasuke." Huh, must be weird for Sasuke to omit his surname…

"I'm Haku," Haku calmly said before smiling at the two boys. "And I am a boy."

"Bullshit—what's with the ribbon, then?!" Suigetsu certainly seems shocked.

All Haku did was giggle and place his hands on my shoulders. "She gave me this ribbon…in exchange for the one she is now wearing in her hair."

Chōjūrō looked at Haku and I, then paused for a moment before tapping Suigetsu on the shoulder and whispering into his ear. I don't know what it was that Chōjūrō had said, but Suigetsu's eyes went wide and he had an understanding look to him.

"I guess boys can wear ribbons, too," Suigetsu muttered.

"You two look nice, by the way…" Chōjūrō said shyly after turning his head to avert his gaze.

"Thank you!" Haku sure sounds happy.

"Since you all seem to be getting along, I'll be going." Ao didn't even bother giving his team a warning, as he was already making his way back to the Mizukage's office, most likely. He did stop for a moment and looked over his shoulder at us, but only to shout, "There better be six of you when I see you guys again!"

I did not like the sound of that…

"Don't worry, Suigetsu won't kill you…probably." Thank you, Chōjūrō, for saying that!

How comforting…when it comes to Kirigakure, if someone says another is capable of killing, they probably are…because this village is known for being quite violent. *Fuck.*

"Meh, they're not worth my time." Oh, thank god…

"Good…because otherwise, I would have had to kill you." Haku, *nooo*—put those senbon away!

"Is that a threat?" Oh great, Suigetsu looks pissed and—hey, shark teeth! Man, it's been a while—oh my god, *focus*, Chōko!

"Suigetsu…" Chōjūrō frowned. "Ao-sensei is going to get mad at you if you kill anyone."

And that pretty much confirms that Suigetsu has killed before. Seriously, how comforting…

"He started it!" Suigetsu pointed at Haku in a manner that reminded me of a little kid. "Who's a little kid?!"

Shit, did I say that out loud?! "I said nothing!"
"Bullshit!" Suigetsu snapped. "I'll have you know I'm thirteen!"

Oh, well *that's* one way to get an age confirmation…

"Chōko-chan's also thirteen-ttebayo," Naruto remarked.

"Sure doesn't look like it," Suigetsu said as he unlatched one of the water bottles off the belt around his waist. He brought the straw-like extension at the top of the water bottle to his mouth and started drinking through it.

"Well—look who's talking!" I seriously have a death wish…

"What did you say, bitch?!" Suigetsu scowled.

"Umm…aren't we supposed to be taking them around Kirigakure?" Chōjūrō smiled nervously, revealing his own set of sharp teeth. "It's almost lunchtime anyways, so we should go get something to eat."

*Growl.*

For once, that was *not* my stomach, but actually Suigetsu's stomach that had growled…quite loudly, at that. All attention focused on him for that.

"Grr…" Suigetsu scowled as a light blush tinged his cheeks. "Shut up!"

"We won't talk about it if we go get something to eat," Sasuke decided to take advantage of the situation.

Suigetsu stared at Sasuke for a moment and nodded his head. "Let's go, then…"

"Haku, you can put the senbon away now..." Please don't antagonize the Hōzuki…who is surprisingly shorter than even Naruto and Sasuke.

"I'm taller than you, at least." Suigetsu patted me on the head for that. "Heh…"

Okay, if he's seriously thinking of pulling that on me, I'm going to punch him.

"I definitely feel taller whenever I stand next to you." Oh, that is fucking *it*!

"Chōko, no!" Sasuke, *yes!*

*SPLASH!*

…

…

By the time we had finally started walking, everyone had come to an agreement to keep Suigetsu and I away from each other. If there was one thing I finally understood, it's *why* Karin got so pissed off at the Hōzuki…For the love of—the guy is literally asking for it!

*If I could physically punch him, I *would!**

"You are seriously lucky that you have that technique of yours keeping you from getting seriously maimed!" I am not fucking kidding.
You best wipe that shit-eating grin off your face, little boy!

"Still taller than you!" Suigetsu taunted me, almost as if he read my mind about what I had said about him.

Normally, I don't mind being called short or any variation of it…it's when someone deliberately tries to make fun of me for it when I start getting mad.

"Don't worry—you'll get taller eventually-ttebayo!" I don't want to hear it coming from you, Naruto! You're supposed to be the short one of this team, not me!

Yes, I am bitter about this because it's what shoved me into this situation… Hey, Chōko, Edward Elric just called—he wants his rage back.

"You really ought to be careful about enraging Chōko," Haku suddenly spoke. "It'd be a shame if you couldn't keep yourself hydrated in order to keep up with Chōko."

Suigetsu blinked a few times and then grabbed one of his water bottles, loudly exclaiming, "The hell—it's ice-cold!"

"How in the…?" Chōjūrō scratched the back of his head.

"I'll tell you how—he's from the Yuki clan!" Suigetsu glared daggers at Haku. "I thought your clan was wiped out!"

"I guess not." Haku smiled. "Do try to be careful, now."

"Haku...why did you do that?" We're in a hidden village where people still have mixed feelings about those with kekkei genkai, you dunderhead!

"Well, I was always curious if it was possible for a Yuki to freeze someone from the Hōzuki clan." Dude—that's morbid.

"K-Keep him away from me!" Suigetsu ran behind Chōjūrō, who seemed rather perplexed regarding the situation.

"Just so we're clear—we're indifferent to those with kekkei genkai." Chōjūrō wanted us to know that. "I am not so sure about the others, but…I'll protect you if anything happens. The Godaime did request us specifically to watch over you."

"We're tour guides!" Suigetsu piped up. "We're supposed to guide—not protect and I sure as hell am not protecting someone who just said he wanted to freeze me."

Oh my god, is Suigetsu crying? Aww, when he isn't being a little shit, he's kinda cute…

Drop that train of thought now, Chōko—before you regret it!

"No one's freezing anyone…" Well, at least Sasuke's being level-minded— "Unless you don't behave, Suigetsu."

Spoke too soon.

"Geh!" Suigetsu was practically cowering behind Chōjūrō at this point.

"So are you going to behave or not?" Sasuke looked sternly at Suigetsu.
"Ugu…" Suigetsu choked back a sob.

"Well…?" Wow, Sasuke looks freaking intimidating in those clothes and mask…

Suigetsu bit his lip and then buried his face into Chōjūrō's shirt. Muffled sobs could be heard seconds afterwards, as Suigetsu started bawling his eyes out, his arms now wrapped around Chōjūrō's waist. Chōjūrō looked absolutely horrified and gave us this look that just screamed, "Help me!"

"So long as you behave, Haku won't freeze you…right?" Sasuke turned to Haku.

Haku smiled sweetly. "Right!"

"There, there…?" Chōjūrō tentatively patted Suigetsu on the arm. He seemed so unsure about how to comfort Suigetsu…

"Did you really have to make him cry-ttebayo?" Naruto asked Sasuke.

"No…but it got the job done, didn't it?" Wow, Sasuke, just wow…on a scale of one to even, I can't. I just can't…

I face palmed. "Naruto, ask Suigetsu if he wants to see your kits."

"Hey, hey—you wanna seem 'em-ttebayo?!" And there went Naruto, being his usual overexcited self when it came to his fox kits. I'm surprised they've stayed asleep as long as they have…

I have a very faint feeling that this is Kurama's work, but I don't want to acknowledge it—not yet. So I'll just push those thoughts out of my head for now…and try and help Chōjūrō out with Suigetsu—man, this is freaking weird.

Just what is it about this thirteen-year-old Suigetsu that makes him different from the one I vaguely know about from Shippuden?!

Fun fact: Suigetsu likes animals…and when Naruto showed Suigetsu the kits, Suigetsu stopped crying and just stared at the sleeping bundles of somewhat colored fluff. Since then, Suigetsu followed Naruto closely as we all made our way to a restaurant Chōjūrō was leading us to for lunch. We only stopped by at the restaurant to buy ourselves bento boxes before leaving to return to our previous location, which was at that unspecified training ground. We ate our lunch there, enjoying the privacy the place gave us. It was around that time that Sasuke brought out Hanī, with Miriku, to help Naruto feed the kits. And when Naruto asked Suigetsu if he wanted to bottle-feed one of the kits, Suigetsu couldn't even make a proper response because he was speechless.

My god, this is so fucking weird.

"I apologize for the way Suigetsu has acted…" Chōjūrō sighed. "He's probably still bitter that his older brother picked me to inherit the Hiramekarei over him."

"The Hiramekarei…?" I questioned.

"One of seven swords, of which belong to the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist," Haku
explained. "I'm assuming you're one, Chōjūrō-kun…?"

"One of the only remaining in Kirigakure, unfortunately..." Chōjūrō frowned. "Everyone else has either left this village or died, like Suigetsu's older brother, Mangetsu."

"How long has he been dead?" Sasuke was a little blunt when he had asked.

"It's barely been a month," Chōjūrō replied. "And I don't think Suigetsu has gotten used to being on his own, as he was always by Mangetsu's side."

That...is honestly heartbreaking to hear. I turned to look at Suigetsu, who was currently bottle-feeding a fox kit. He was quite enthralled with his position, nodding his head every once in a while to respond to some of the things Naruto was telling him.

"So what you're saying is that he's taking it out on you because he misses his older brother and is jealous you got one of the only remaining possessions that were left of Mangetsu?" That sounds about right...

Chōjūrō furrowed his brow. "...I never thought of it that way."

"He's probably venting as a way to cope," Sasuke suggested. "And you said he was always by Mangetsu's side?"

"Correct." Chōjūrō nodded his head. "In fact, Mangetsu was Suigetsu's Jounin-sensei. When he died, the Godaime transferred Suigetsu onto my team."

"Ah, so that's why he's so disrespectful of Ao-san." Haku seemed to understand. "He probably views Ao-san as someone trying to replace Mangetsu-san."

I'm not even going to question why Haku would know something like that...nope, nope, nope!

"Grief can do that to a person..." Sasuke would definitely know about grief...in fact, I would, as well.

I cleared my throat. "Anyways, since Suigetsu is still used to being by Mangetsu's side, I think it's safe to assume that the way Suigetsu is acting towards all of us is the same as if he was still by his older brother's side."

"Meaning...?" Sasuke looked questioningly at me.

"He's being a little shit because he's used to his older brother bailing him out when he gets in trouble." Suigetsu reminds me a lot of the Takemi triplets, in the sense that they were the way they were because of how well they worked together when it came to causing havoc for the Genin and their Jounin-sensei. The more I think about it now, the more it makes sense as to why the Takemi triplets' reign of terror came to an end, because Riku started crushing on Sasuke and left his sisters on their own, which threw off their teamwork and so on. "Which certainly backfired on him today."

"He isn't the most mature Genin I've worked with..." Chōjūrō sighed. "Though, I shouldn't be talking, either... Almost fifteen and I'm still a Genin—how embarrassing."

"Wait, you're almost fifteen?!” Holy crap, I thought you were thirteen—you're freaking short for your age! Well, so is Haku and—wait...I think Chōjūrō and Haku are about the same height...huh...never mind, I guess.

"Depressing, isn't it?" Chōjūrō frowned. "I managed to become a member of the Seven Ninja
Swordsmen of the Mist before becoming a Chuunin."

Wow, is the pressure in Kirigakure to become a Chuunin that much higher than in Konoha?! Oh my god, I'm really glad I wasn't born in Kirigakure.

"Well, the Chuunin exams are coming up in Konoha!" I tried to cheer Chōjūrō up. "Maybe you can try your luck, there!"

"Problem…we need a third member in Team Ao and I don't think Kirigakure is ready to participate in anything at this moment…" Chōjūrō scratched the back of his head. "Though, thanks for the offer—I really appreciate it."

"It's nothing—just smile a bit more, okay?" You look cute when you smile…it's the teeth.

Chōjūrō blinked and managed to smile nervously. "Like this?"

"Close enough…" I smiled back. "I like your glasses, by the way."

Finally, I've been waiting to get that off my chest!

A light blush tinged Chōjūrō's cheeks. "Um…likewise…"

Aww, that's the first time anyone has ever complimented me on my glasses! "You're so nice! Hey—how to you fight with your glasses?"

"I, uhh...have these keeping them in place." Chōjūrō tapped on the protectors covering his ears. "If that's what you're asking..."

I actually wasn't, but holy crap—maybe I invest in something like that for myself! "That's actually pretty cool!"

It would certainly prevent the Velma situations I've been having from time to time...

Jinkies.

"So about that tour?" Haku suddenly brought up, his tone somewhat firm.

"R-Right!" Chōjūrō sputtered. "Umm…I think we should wait until those two are done feeding the kits…"

It certainly seemed like a bad idea to separate Suigetsu from that kit he was holding…

Chapter End Notes

3-31-18 Chōko's comments about her glasses are brought to you by someone on spacebattles giving me legit criticism about her glasses falling off her face, so now do expect Chōko to like...eventually do something about it. She might take the Chōjūrō at this rate, but yeah!

May be a shorter chapter, but I consider this the character establishing chapter for Chōjūrō and Suigetsu—especially Suigetsu. Prior to writing this fic, I didn't know much about him, which meant Chōko also didn't know much about him. He is part of the
In any case, Suigetsu is thirteen years old and has not been captured by Orochimaru just yet. At the same time, Suigetsu is still dealing with the fact that his older brother, Mangetsu just died, and is rather bitter over the fact that Chōjūrō got his sword, the Hiramekarei, of which Mangetsu was presumed to have wielded before Chōjūrō.

And considering that Mei is Mizukage, she assigned Suigetsu onto the team with the person he'd probably least wanted to see: Chōjūrō. Bit of an agitator for Suigetsu, and he's taking it out on Chōjūrō, who is someone who lets it happen.

What I'm trying to say is that Suigetsu isn't exactly the character he'll be in Shippuden just yet... and considering what's happened in this chapter (as well as Naruto), he probably won't be the same person he was in Shippuden. He's immature right now, and is still accustomed to being by Mangetsu's side. By the by, due to personal reasons, thirteen-year-old Suigetsu ended up being shorter than everyone but Chōko—if only because Chōjūrō is not only getting pushed around by someone younger than he is, but also by someone who is shorter than he is. It's just the mental image that makes it work.

Of course, do keep in mind that Suigetsu is still capable of murder and retains his love for killing. He still likes cutting things, which is something he most likely developed from being alongside his older brother, Mangetsu. And he definitely still has his cowardly side—it's more that Suigetsu is emotional about it. Again, he is thirteen, and it's been only a month since his older brother has died. He's only lucky that Orochimaru hasn't gotten his snaky hands on the Hōzuki just yet. By the by, Chōko does not know this is what happens to Suigetsu—this is information she has no details on, so just a heads up.

Also, guess who also had older brothers and lost them? Sasuke and Naruto... you're gonna be seeing some bonding of some sort come the next chapter—I can guarantee that. I'll make sure the next chapter is longer than this one.

Anyways, how's that dramatic irony going for you, knowing that Haku and Chōko are engaged, but Chōko not knowing it herself and not really seeing the signs that Haku is giving off of being a protective and jealous husband? Because Haku was definitely jealous with how well Chōko and Chōjūrō were getting along, even though the two were just being chummy. And in case you haven't noticed, Chojuro and Suigetsu are aware that the two are engaged—that was what the whispering was.

Oh and a friendly reminder—the engagement and marriages are only valid until they head back to Konoha, where Zabuza and Haku will make the switch to villages. The customs only apply if at least ONE person is from Kirigakure, which will not be the case when the switch occurs. Hope everyone understands!

To be honest, with the recent shipping of Zabuza/Kakashi, I might consider it... might—it's just SO cracky and yet, if you guys think it has potential, I'll go for it (or not, I just want to see how many of you guys actually ship it). I mean, the only reason the marriage thing happened between them was because Kakashi being engagement-block bit him in the ass. But yeah, it's up to you guys if you think it has potential. Again, I just want to see who actually ships it, since it's SO cracky.
In any case, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! I'll try to get the next one up soon, so until next time!
Did you know that Kirigakure has a beach? I sure didn't, but after Chōjūrō and Suigetsu showed us around Kirigakure, they decided to take us to the beach, where Naruto lowered his basket onto the ground to allow the fox kits to crawl out. The fox kits had grown rather restless since this afternoon, to the point that this detour from the tour had been all to allow the kits to stretch out their legs.

Up until now, the kits were only allowed in closed spaces. When we were on the ship, the kits had managed to climb out of the basket and had taken their first, experimental steps in Naruto and Sasuke's room. Naruto had been so proud, but so worried at the same time, since the rocking motion of the ship kept making the kits lose their balance. Here, the kits were stumbling around, not very accustomed to the sandy ground beneath them. While the ship wasn't exactly the most stationary place for anyone, the floor was at least solid, unlike the sand.

Once the kits had grown used to sandy ground, they started to grow playful after noticing how strange and new the sand was to them.

"They grow up so fast-ttebayo..." Naruto was extremely proud.

"Oi, you might want to do something about Yuu, because she's heading toward the water," Sasuke suddenly said.

And right Sasuke was—Yuu, the albino fox kit, was dashing over to the extremely dark waters crashing gently against the shore. The sight of the movement and the sound probably attracted her and it set off a chain reaction, with the other kits following after Yuu.

Naruto sputtered and quickly made a bunch of shadow clones that sped over to the kits, barely managing to prevent them from getting any closer to the water. Seeing that his babies were no longer in any danger, Naruto sighed loudly in relief.

"That was really close," Haku remarked.

"Can foxes swim?" Suigetsu asked.

"I don't think so—not at this age...?" Chōjūrō looked so unsure. "Umm...it still wouldn't be a good idea for a small animal to get anywhere close to the water. It's really cold..."

"Certainly feels cold, here." I adjusted my scarf, shuddering slightly when a particularly cold breeze brushed against my skin.

"But it's getting brighter...?" Sasuke commented on the sudden change in coloring of the sky.

"Ah, looks like you're in luck!" Chōjūrō exclaimed. "Kirimakure never really gets a lot of sun, but we do get sunsets."

"It rarely happens, though," Suigetsu added. "They're more common in summer, but the same thing usually applies. For a brief moment of the day, the mist and sky clear up and you get to witness this beauty."

The brilliant hues of red, orange, yellow, and pink stretched across the horizon as the sun slowly
began to set. The lower the sun kept going, the more luminescent its reflection in the dark blue waters became. It was so strange, that such a gloomy, dark and misty village could have such a beautiful sunset.

"Hmm…" I thought for a moment deciding to kick off my blue sandals so that I could feel the sand beneath my feet. It was cold, but I definitely got a nostalgic feel from this. It had been so long since I've last been on a beach. There really aren't any beaches in Konohagakure—only rivers, ponds, and lakes.

Wave country definitely had a lot of beaches, though none of us had any time to check them out, as we were rather occupied with other things. So to be in this situation was certainly uplifting for me. It definitely made everything that I went through on that ship (that goddamned seasickness) worthwhile.

"I guess we really are lucky…" That's a nice thought to consider for once. I adjusted my glasses, pausing for a moment afterwards before my eyes diverted to the side, focusing on Sasuke. Sasuke was rather distracted by the sunset to notice what was going on…which made it oh, so tempting to push him before running off across the sand. I might have pushed Sasuke a little harder than usual as he ended up flopping onto the sand. I quickened my pace as I heard Sasuke yell loudly that he was going to get me for what I had done and soon started chasing after me.

I ended up bumping into Naruto (the actual Naruto—the clones were busy keeping the kits away from the water), which urged him to chase after me as well.

"Run, bitch, run—ahahahah!" Suigetsu cackled.

"Suigetsu, behave!" Chōjūrō scolded his teammate lightly. "Remember Haku…"

"I still am curious," Haku stated.

That shut Suigetsu up.

If I wasn't busy being chased after my friends, I would have laughed—actually, the fact that I was being chased after my friends made me laugh. It was just nice to do something so childish every once in a while…

"Whoa!" Holy crap, why?!

*Thud!*

"Blek!" Eeeugh, I got sand in my mouth! Ick, get it out!

"Gotcha, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaimed.

"Told you I'd get you for it…" You sure did, Sasuke—wait, no!

"Ow!" Crud, that forehead poke hurt. Almost as much as these two bozos landing on me, but I didn't mind that. "Please get off…"

"Sorry!" Naruto apologized.

"Hn…" was all Sasuke said, but he did get off of me, like Naruto.

I spat out some sand and wiped my mouth before getting up. I felt the annoying sensation of grains of sand brushing against my skin. The sand must have gotten into my clothes when Sasuke and
Naruto tackled me onto the ground…

"You hurt?" Sasuke asked, looking me over as he did. "Tell me so I can heal you."

"I'm fine—just have some sand in my clothes." Ugh, how annoying! "Thanks anyways."

Naruto helped me brush some of the sand off my back. "So what do you think of Kirigakure?"

"Rather dark and gloomy, but this sunset is very pretty." Oh, so pretty…if only we had a camera… ahh, I guess being here to see it isn't so bad.

When Ao finally came to fetch us, Haku and I were busy building a sand castle, Naruto and Suigetsu were playing with the fox kits, and Sasuke was having a rather good time talking with Chōjūrō. Ao did a headcount, even though all six of us were present—he probably just wanted to make sure Suigetsu didn't kill any of us.

"Surprised you actually listened for once," Ao remarked.

"I didn't feel like it," Suigetsu simply said.

Or more like Haku would have frozen your ass if you tried anything funny, Suigetsu.

"Just follow me—the Godaime wishes to meet with all of you again," Ao told us. "She has taken the liberty of assigning your accommodations during your stay in Kirigakure."

Is that why Kakashi made us store our backpacks into a sealing scroll before we disembarked? Huh…didn't think we were staying longer in Kirigakure, but if it means avoiding seasickness, I'm totally fine with it!

Apparently, Mei's idea when it came to assigning us our accommodations was to reserve us a couple of rooms at her favorite place in Kirigakure. That place just so happened to be a rather extravagant inn known for its hot springs. I have never been to such a fancy place—and the only experience I have is with video games (looking at you, *Persona 3* and *4*), and numerous anime episodes. Though, to say I wasn't ecstatic would be a goddamn lie.

It was so weird to see Kakashi and Zabuza in yukata—even more so, because even in a yukata, Kakashi still kept his mask. I did find it strange that Mei wasn't with them, but I decided not to think too much about it and just went to my room, which I had to myself, since Kakashi said we all had our own rooms to ourselves (which is pretty awesome).

The first thing I did when I went into my room was change into the yukata placed out for me to use. My clothes were pretty sandy and I felt like taking a bath to warm myself up. It wasn't that chilly outside (at least—I don't think it is), but my body was more accustomed to the warmer weather in Konohagakure.

Though, it was shortly after I had finished cleaning myself up and was making my way out to go take a dip in the hot springs that I *finally* found Mei. Let's just say it was awkward for me to come across the Godaime in such a situation, because like, *holy sh*t*—this was something out of an ecchi manga!

I may or may not have ogled Mei after coming across her in the hot springs—which *totally* made my
situation even more awkward when Mei found out I was staring at her. Then she made the comment of, "Don't worry—I'm sure you'll grow some when you get older."

I don't even know if I want to grow any, considering how big they can possibly get (*cough*Tsunade*cough*)…

…

Dinner was a hell of a lot better than I thought it would be, even though my face was still rather red (I don't know whether if it was from the hot springs or embarrassment, because Mei brought up what I had told her when I first met her). The food was at least tasty, Mei looked absolutely stunning in that yukata (she winked at me because she caught me staring—I need to stop doing that), and Chōjūrō, Suigetsu, and Ao joined us for the occasion, with Chōjūrō suggesting to Naruto to start moving the fox kits onto solid food.

"When they're older, they're gonna be little killing machines." Suigetsu looked at the kits in awe as they tore up the grounded up meat on the plate that was set down for them.

This comment disturbed Naruto as he turned to Kakashi for solace. "Kakashi-sensei?"

"Well, they are the type of animal that hunts for food," Kakashi remarked.

"Oh…" Naruto simply said. "…Can my foxes tear this guy to pieces now-ttebayo?"

_Holy crap, Naruto—where did that come from?!_

"No, Naruto," Kakashi said firmly.

"They couldn't, even if they wanted to!" Suigetsu grinned. "It'll take more than that to take down a Hōzuki."

"A Hōzuki, huh…?" Zabuza seemed rather intrigued. "Never thought I'd see one of you guys again."

"Eh…what do you mean?" Suigetsu looked questioningly at Zabuza.

"Nothing really…" Zabuza still wasn't in a position to give away his actual identity. "So Chōjūrō, I hear you're one of the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist."

"Uh…yeah, I guess I am…" Chōjūrō averted his gaze, a light blush tinging his cheeks.

"And yet he's still a Genin." Ao sighed.

Mei giggled. "Ao, don't start."

"Godaime…!" Poor Ao…

…

One week is how long we were going to stay in Kirigakure. And Mei made it a habit to keep Chōjūrō and Suigetsu as our guards—a bit of a C-rank mission for them and a precautionary move for us. It certainly kept Kirigakure shinobi off of us. Meanwhile with Kakashi and Zabuza, the two were often with Mei, going off to who knows where—Ao never really answers when we ask him…
That aside, when Suigetsu learned that Sasuke and Naruto had also lost their older brothers, the three of them began to bond. It was…weird, because I walked into the room and found the three of them talking about what their older brothers would do and so on. I felt so out of place, even though I actually had an older brother—then again, Chōji isn't dead, but neither was Itachi…

But Itachi was gone and…yeah, I have every reason to feel out of place.

"It's okay, Chōko…you always have me." And Haku was being an absolute sweetie.

"That's very kind of you." I really appreciate it. "But I don't think Chōjūrō appreciates being ignored."

"I-I don't…" Chōjūrō frowned. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, Haku probably didn't mean to." He isn't that type of guy…as far as I know. "Do you wanna get some sushi or something?"

"I'd like that…I think." Chōjūrō ended up looking at Haku for a confirmation.

Haku just smiled innocently and said, "It's fine—go ahead."

"You sure you don't want to come along?" I was kinda insinuating that you were to come along.

Haku just shook his head. "No, I'm fine…just keep an eye on her or else."

"U-Um…y-yes." Chōjūrō nodded his head vigorously.

We left shortly after that and had a good time eating out. It was just to interesting to watch Chōjūrō eat all that sushi with his shark-like teeth. It was so cute!

"Not everyone really appreciates the Kirigakure teeth," Chōjūrō told me as we were returning to the inn. "It's a preference and there are some people who file them down—but it's not really recommended."

_Yikes—that sounds unpleasant!_

"Do you like them?" Personally, I wouldn't mind having shark teeth.

"More or less…I think." Chōjūrō wasn't too sure. "Suigetsu does like his teeth. He says they make it easier to tear out someone's throat."

Okay, I didn't need that mental image. "Anyways, I know a number of people and children with Kirigakure teeth back in Konohagakure."

"Oh, people of Kiri descent?" Chōjūrō questioned.

"Yeah, that's exactly what they are!" I replied. "One of the children I know, Manabe Kazuichi, didn't like his teeth because the children would pick on him for it."

"That tends to happen from time to time in classes where the ratio of those with these type of teeth and those without them are unbalanced," Chōjūrō remarked. "It mostly happens when the amount of students with these teeth are the minority. Even here, it's more likely to get us the nickname of monsters amongst civilians, who never seem to possess these teeth."

"Really…?" So it's a shinobi thing as well?
"I don't know—there are a lot of things that go on in civilian families that are just as bad as those in clan families…" Chōjūrō frowned. He was being rather ambiguous, but ambiguous in this sense was better than being clear.

Because I don't think I want to know what he meant by that.

"The Godaime said she was going to fix that." A light blush tinged Chōjūrō's cheeks at the mere mention of Mei. "She says she was going to fix a lot of things—and I hope she's right. It would be really nice for people to be as kind as you…I think."

"You think I'm nice?" Aww, thanks! "Well, I think you're nice as well!"

Chōjūrō smiled nervously. "Ao-sensei said that being too nice won't work out too well in my shinobi career—especially after I became a member of the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist."

"Screw what Ao says—Mei disagrees with him!" I could hear it in her tone… "That's why she acts that way when it comes to you."

"R-Really?" Aww, Chōjūrō's blushing again! "I never thought…!"

"It just comes to show that people care for you!" It's always a nice feeling to know that. "When you have that one person who is like that, it makes you want to protect them. And having something to protect is when you truly can become strong…or at least, that's what Naruto said Haku had told him."

"Haku is amazing, isn't he?" Chōjūrō sighed.

"Yeah…he is." Haku is also a very pretty boy with nice hair and great make-up skills. "So what was up with you looking at him after you took up my offer for sushi?"

Chōjūrō sputtered. "It's nothing!"

"Uh-huh…" I'm onto you…

Dinner was certainly interesting that night, when Suigetsu started going off about what Naruto told him in regards to becoming a tree, like Shisui had. Upon hearing Shisui's name, Ao had this reaction that looked almost as if he recognized the name.

"Is this Shisui…Shunshin no Shisui?" Ao asked.

Naruto made a face. "Shunshin no Shisui…?"

Kakashi coughed. "That was Uchiha Shisui's nickname."

"Oh!" Naruto nodded his head. "Yeah, that's him! He was my Nii-san-ttebayo!"

"I'm assuming you've had an encounter with him?" Mei looked questioningly at Ao.

Ao nodded his head. "I might have confronted him sometime in the past…how is he?"

"He's dead," Sasuke bluntly said. "Suicide."
A small bead of sweat rolled down the side of Ao's face. "OH…oh…I'm sorry for your loss?"

..."Ao-sensei, you suck at condolences," Suigetsu remarked.
Ao scowled. "Shut up!"
"Anyways, he isn't really dead-ttebayo!" Naruto stated. "Shisui-nii said one doesn't truly die until they're forgotten."
"Heehee, you might want to be careful, Ao-sensei!" Suigetsu snickered. "If you're not careful, you'll be left behind while Chôjûrô and I mark our place in history."
"Suigetsu, that's not nice…" Chôjûrô frowned.
"So!" Mei decided to change the subject. "Mochi…how are you and Kakashi getting along?"
Zabuza nearly spat out his sake when Mei had asked him that. "Mochi-sama…?" Haku looked at Zabuza. "What does she mean by that?"
"Oh, didn't your guardian tell you?" Mei's smile was mischievous. "He and Kakashi got married because Kakashi placed the ring on his left ringfinger."
Haku's eyes widened. "He did?"
"Wait, what's going on?" I'm confused…what's this about a ring—wait! "You mean that ring Sensei stole from me?!"
I'm still bitter about that, by the way…
"How are Kakashi and Mochi married?!" Sasuke was just baffled. "Kakashi?!"
Kakashi face palmed.
"Well, if your Sensei won't tell you, then I will." Mei smiled. "Did you know Kirigakure has a custom where if one accepts a ring from another and places it on their left ring finger, it legally binds them together in marriage—or an engagement, in case one of them isn't of age? Because there is such a custom…in fact, that is one of many—quite the popular one, out of them all."
Whoa…so Kirigakure is Ninja Vegas? Ahahhaa, oh my god—that is just so hilarious! "Pfft—ahahahaha!"
"Don't laugh about it!" Kakashi snapped. "You nearly got engaged to Haku for it!"
What…but I wasn't going to place it on my left ring finger! "I was going to place it on my right ring finger! Why'd you put it on your left?! Why did you put it on at all?!"
If anything, this is karma for stealing a ring meant for me! Wait…how is Kakashi not married or engaged to Haku if he was the one to take it from the boy?
"The custom will apply to the guardian if someone, like Haku, has an age difference of at least six years," Mei explained. "Wouldn't want someone so young get married or engaged to someone who is much older, now would we?"
"No…I guess not." Sounds legit to me…as does Ninja Vegas—I can't believe Kirigakure is Ninja Vegas, like…why Kiri, of all places?! That's just so ironic!

"Naruto, are you okay?" Sasuke asked Naruto, who has yet to say anything.

A moment passed before Naruto turned his attention to Zabuza and asked, "Can I call you Tou-chan?"

Zabuza sputtered and firmly said, "No!"

Sasuke looked so done.

Haku looked guilty, since it was technically his fault this had happened.

I was just laughing my ass off because this was too hilarious!

\textit{Best. Mission. Ever!}

…

…

If there was one thing about that kimono I bought Haku the day before we left Konoha, it's that my plan worked out flawlessly. Shortly after dinner, in which we all stayed behind to drink tea and converse, despite the awkward tension that came from Zabuza and Kakashi's accidental marriage (which is surprisingly common in Kiri when foreigners are involved), I got this great idea to get my koto and play us a song…

And I did just that, but not without bringing Haku along to tell him that the idea we had once talked about in his room was to go into motion. So after I had played my tune, might have sung a little…okay, a lot, Haku barged into the room, wearing a brilliant red kimono with a green obi and a yellow hairpin in his hair, carrying a pair of scissors in his hand, asking, "Am I beautiful?"

Naruto screamed…\textit{loudly}. That was his reaction and I seriously wasn't expecting him to be that loud, because \textit{ouch}!

"Thank you, Naruto, for the impromptu hearing test," Kakashi deadpanned.

I snorted before bursting into a fit of laughter. I had been waiting for this exact moment…I felt a little bad for scaring Naruto to this degree, but I just \textit{had} to do it. I may or may not be a sadist, in a certain sense, because I really enjoyed this too much for my own good. At least Naruto didn't hate me for this…but he did refuse to speak to me until the very next day, when he said I got him good. Then he said he was going to get me back.

And he did…later during the day, when he spiked my onigiri with wasabi. Too much wasabi is gag-inducing, bleck…

"He got you good!" Shut \textit{up}, Suigetsu.

"Ulp…" Still haven't gotten the taste out yet.

"Suigetsu, it isn't nice to pick on Chōko like that." Chōjūrō frowned.

"Meh…” Suigetsu scoffed.

I grabbed one of Suigetsu's water bottles and started drinking through the straw. This pissed off
Suigetsu immensely.

"Hey, that's mine!" Suigetsu tried to swipe back his water bottle, but I swatted his hand away.

Then Naruto exclaimed, "Indirect kiss-ttebayo!"

That was about the fastest way to make Suigetsu blush and the fastest way to make me throw a water bottle. It's funny, how I wouldn't have given a damn about this sort of shit in my past life, but hey, that's what this new life did to me. I might have poked fun at Naruto and Sasuke's reactions to losing their first kiss, but I had a near freak-out when I realized it was almost me who had lost my first kiss.

Cultural differences are definitely a thing…especially when you grow up, learning that kissing is a rather intimate act. It's really hard to ignore it, even with the memory I had of my past life…

"You know it really doesn't count, right?" Haku tried to be reassuring.

"What if it does?!" Suigetsu snapped. "That means I lost my first kiss to the flat one!"

"Why were you staring at my chest?" And why is Naruto the orange one and Sasuke the masked one?! Why couldn't I get a nickname like the short one or something?! I feel harassed.

Suigetsu and I weren't on the best terms, come the next day. It got even worse when I was helping Naruto name the fox kits. So far, only six out of the nine fox kits have been named, of which Yuu was included. Blue was a female silver fox, Tohru was a female gray fox, and Kyo was a male swift fox. Yosuke was a male marble fox and Kakyoin (I was stuck between Noriaki and Tenmei) was a female platinum fox…I might have named her before I got a confirmation on sex…I thought she was male, okay?! The name just stuck…

Right now, I was looking over a male cross fox Naruto had just handed me.

"What do you think-ttebayo?" Naruto asked.

"Jotaro…" Because even now, I cannot forget what got me into this situation when it came to my lack of knowledge. Yare yare daze… "I'm gonna call him Jojo, for short."

It is official…I am trash.

"That's a stupid name." Oh screw off, Suigetsu—I don't see you contributing to the naming process!

"You said that about every name she's given a fox," Chōjūrō remarked. "Are you sure you're not just picking on her?"

"Well?" Haku looked at Suigetsu for an answer.

Suigetsu huffed and looked away. Yeah, he better…

I snorted and set Jotaro down onto the floor. I looked over at Naruto, who was currently looking at a melanistic fox in his hands. He was frowning as he looked at the kit's underside.

"I still can't believe anyone could do this to something so little-ttebayo…" Naruto was referring to the kit's defect, which, up until recently, we thought the kit was female. Instead, it turned out the kit was male, just—well…let's just say it won't be reproducing any time in the future.

"Remind me again why anyone would think it would be a good idea to do that to a kit so young?" I
still don't understand. It's a miracle this kit managed to live this long…

"The less testosterone a fox has, the more beautiful its coat will be…remember?" Sasuke brought up. "Gatou wanted better coats…"

"I'm glad we saved them, dattebayo." Naruto smiled as he nuzzled his face against the kit's fur. "I wonder what name Chōko-chan will give you!"

"Ryuui-ichi," I immediately said. "What do you think?"

Naruto grinned widely. "I like it!"

"What about this one?" Sasuke held up a red fox that was currently gnawing on his hand.

I took one look at the red fox, felt myself smirk as I said, "Kurama."

"Ah!" Naruto gasped.

"What's wrong?" We all looked at Naruto, who had this strange expression on his face.

"Just now…" Naruto placed his hand on his stomach. "I felt so pissed off—even though I don't know why-ttebayo…"

It didn't take me too long to realize that Kurama, the one that was sealed inside Naruto, had heard me. I snickered as I imagined how annoyed Kurama must have felt…ahahaha, oh man, this is gonna bite me in the ass in the future! But it will still be worth it!

Probably…I don't care!

...

Dinner was certainly interesting, if you consider Suigetsu stealing my food interesting! God dammit, is he still mad at me for the indirect kiss—hey, hands off the masago!

"I swear to god, Suigetsu—if you steal my masago nigiri again, I will wound you!" I might have been a little passive when you took the sea urchin. I might have also been a bit indifferent when you took the halibut, but I draw the line at masago nigiri! "Touch my food again—I dare you!"

"Don't mind if I do!" Suigetsu, you little shit!

"U-Um…you can have my masago nigiri if you want…" Chōjūrō didn't even bother to wait for my response as he used his chopsticks to place masago nigiri onto my plate.

"How nice, Chōjūrō." Mei smiled.

Chōjūrō's cheeks heated up as he averted his gaze from Mei. "I-I just don't want them to fight…"

"I could easily handle that, you know," Haku stated. "Suigetsu-kun, are we going to behave or am I going to have to freeze you?"

"I'll behave…" Tears were quite quick to weld up in the corners of Suigetsu's eyes…geez, what a crybaby.

"Teach you to steal my masago nigiri…" I muttered to myself as I ate another piece of sushi.

"To be reduced to such a state—my, how you've fallen, Suigetsu." Ao smirked.
Suigetsu clenched his teeth, but said nothing.

"Maa, Ao-san…don't you think you're being a little too hard on Suigetsu?" Kakashi asked Ao.

"I don't see a problem," Zabuza remarked. "Coddling a Genin turns them soft."

Mei face palmed. "You guys are too much…why can't they be more like you, Kakashi?"

"Can I get some more tamago-ttebayo?" Naruto held up his plate, completely oblivious to what had been going on.

Sasuke took one look at Naruto's plate and sighed as he handed Naruto his plate. Naruto smiled widely and thanked Sasuke.

It was during this time that our dinner was interrupted by a Kirigakure hunter-nin barging into the room. Mei seemed rather tense when she saw the hunter-nin enter the room.

"Mizukage-sama—we have finally returned with the requested target." The hunter-nin was most likely female, based on the feminine tone of their voice and figure, though one could never be too sure...

It's always best not to assume, after all.

"Is he…alive?" A small bead of sweat rolled down the side of Mei's face.

"He is unconscious, but otherwise, still alive," the hunter-nin replied. "We've restrained him and given him enough suppressors to keep him down for a few days. Be warned, though—he is still very dangerous. Not many of us returned alive, so do keep your guard up, Mizukage-sama."

Mei nodded her head. "I will keep that in mind."

"What do you wish for us to do with him?" the hunter-nin asked.

"Is he with you right now?" Mei stood up from her seat, adjusting her yukata right afterwards.

The hunter-nin nodded. "Just outside the door…"

"Then bring him in," Mei told the hunter-nin. "Feel free to leave afterwards."

"But Mizukage-sama!" the hunter-nin protested.

Mei smiled. "It will be fine…Kakashi of the Sharingan is with us."

The hunter-nin stared at Mei for a moment before turning to look at Kakashi, who just waved back. The hunter-nin stared at Kakashi for a moment before nodding and leaving the room. A few minutes afterwards, a group of hunter-nin entered the room, carrying the body of an unconscious dark, brown-haired male who was restrained. Fūinjutsu might have been used on the bindings to keep the male restrained.

Before they had all left, the hunter-nin from earlier handed Mei a scroll, saying that it contained the target's weaponry. After they had left, all attention focused on the unconscious male in the room who seemed rather familiar to me…

"Is that Utakata?" Zabuza finally spoke.

"That is him," Mei replied.
"I've never known Kirigakure for bring back missing-nin alive," Kakashi mused.

"That's because we don't!" Suigetsu exclaimed. "Godaime, why is he still alive?"

"Suigetsu, calm down!" Chōjūrō tried his best to calm the Hōzuki down.

"Looks like I have some explaining to do…" Mei smiled wistfully. "Just where do I begin?"

"Start by explaining why you had hunter-nin track Utakata down," Zabuza said.

"I guess that would be a good place to start," Mei said before sitting back down at her seat. "I don't know exactly when Utakata had left the village—probably sometime before I became Mizukage—but when it came to my attention that he had left the village because of the treatment he had been receiving, I just had to bring him back…to apologize."

This had caught Naruto's attention. "What treatment?"

"How do I say this without saying too much…?" It seemed as though Mei was trying to hide something, but Zabuza had other plans.

"Utakata is one of Kirigakure's jinchuuriki," Zabuza bluntly stated. "He is the Rokubi container."

"He wasn't exactly treated the best in Kirigakure…" Haku must have sympathized with Utakata, who probably was unwanted in Kirigakure.

To hear that must have elated Naruto to a point. Naruto was quick to dash over to Utakata's side and started poking at him, trying to get him to wake up. It must be the idea of having someone who was like him motivating Naruto to wake up the Rokubi container.

"Ah, so that's why you mentioned my name," Kakashi said as an afterthought, though he did seem rather strained to have Naruto around another jinchuuriki.

Mei face palmed. "Since the cat's out of the bag, I might as well tell you that the Yondaime was our Sanbi container…"

"Should you really be telling them such classified information, Godaime?!" Ao seemed rather nervous.

Mei just huffed. "It's my call to reveal classified information…"

And such classified information made Naruto grin widely. He was probably happy to hear that someone who was a jinchuuriki, like him, was capable of becoming a Kage. He continued trying to wake up Utakata, only for Sasuke to pull him away from the jinchuuriki.

"Didn't you hear what the hunter-nin had said?!" Sasuke scolded Naruto. "This guy is dangerous and killed many of the hunter-nin that were after him."

"But I want to talk to him-ttebayo!" Naruto protested. "He can't be that dangerous—plus the Mizukage wants to apologize to him, and for that to happen, he needs to be awake!"

"Are you sure it was fine to let everyone else leave, G-Godaime?" Chōjūrō looked nervously at Mei.

"There's a reason why I became Godaime Mizukage and it isn't because of my good looks." Mei smiled as she flipped her hair. "I'm very capable of defending myself, as well as this hidden village, if the moment calls for it."
"Heeey, he's waking up, dattebayo!" Naruto suddenly exclaimed.

"Wh…Where am I?" a very sluggish voice asked.

Utakata lifted his head off the floor, narrow pale golden eyes struggling to focus. I'm not exactly sure what was going through his head when the first thing he saw was Naruto's blue eyes. All I could say is that Naruto caught him completely off-guard, based on his reaction. Basically, Utakata had immediately backed away from Naruto, his eyes somewhat wide and alert.

"I'm not gonna hurt you-ttebayo…" Naruto frowned.

"Why am I…still alive?" Utakata seemed perplexed.

Mei face palmed. "Are you kidding? They were supposed to have talked to you—you're alive because I requested that you be brought back alive."

Utakata blinked, narrowing his eyes as he looked at Mei. "Who're you?"

"I'm Terumī Mei, the Godaime Mizukage," Mei said with a smile. "And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about you when I found out that you left our village."

Utakata had an expression of disbelief on his face. "Wha…? I…"

"Are you hungry?" Mei gestured at the array of food on the table.

"Mei, I think you're freaking him out with your hospitality," Zabuza suddenly said.

Utakata turned away from Mei and looked at Zabuza, then at Kakashi, and finally, everyone else. It seemed as though he had only just realized that there were more people than he had originally thought were in this room. That is understandable, considering the hunter-nin had mentioned they got Utakata on suppressors that should keep him down for a few days.

"Can he stay in my room tonight-ttebayo?" Naruto asked as if he didn't just ask the Mizukage if she could let him room with a missing-nin jinchuuriki.

Why does Utakata look so familiar to me—oh, I remember now! Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 3…yeah, I remember my friend making a comment about the choice in weapon and attack Utakata had…I believe they were bubbles? Eh, I don't really know…the only reason I even recognize Mei was because of that game and I only briefly ever saw Utakata's picture.

Heh, I suck so much at that game, you don't even know…

"C'mon, eat up!" Mei said as she tried to feed Utakata a piece of sushi with chopsticks.

Ao sputtered. "Godaime, are you sure you should be doing that?!"

"Hmm…" Mei thought for a moment. "Maybe you're on to something…but on the other hand—open up!"

Utakata's face was about as red as a tomato. "I-I'm not hungry—you're probably trying to drug me."

Mei frowned. "I am not…hey, Chōko—come here."

I did as I was told and was soon told to open my mouth, which I did. Mei ended up feeding me the sushi she had tried to give Utakata and I was quite fine with that…then Naruto repeated what he had said the other day.
"Indirect kiss!" Stop making me blush, Naruto!

My face lit up with a luminescent blush as I swallowed down the piece of sushi in my mouth, almost choking in the process. I covered my face afterwards in embarrassment.

"That's twice already, flat one!" Suigetsu exclaimed.

"Why were you looking at my Genin's chest?" Kakashi sounded rather annoyed.

"Ha~, I didn't think about it that way~!" Mei giggled. "But I don't think indirect kisses count…unless you want them to?"

The look that Mei gave me afterwards nearly made my heart race. Oh god, this lady was too much…

"Anyways, as you can see, this food isn't drugged…in fact, we're all eating it," Mei told Utakata. "Now try not to be so stubborn and just let me feed you."

"I'd rather you not!" Utakata snapped.

"Hum…I wasn't expecting you to be so volatile…" Mei frowned. "Of course, I wouldn't blame you, after how the village has treated you."

"It must have been hard, huh?" Naruto looked sympathetically at Utakata. "For people to look at you like you did something wrong, even though you didn't do anything…it's hard, isn't it-ttebayo?"

Why does that sound…oh…I see. Haa…it's so weird—hearing words you said to someone repeated by them towards someone else. It's rather touching, because it just shows how much of an effect your words had…

Utakata looked at Naruto, trying to figure out what exactly was it the blond was trying to get at. It took Utakata a couple of seconds to put two and two together, because his eyes widened slightly. Looks like two jinchuuriki had just found each other…

Dinner might have gotten a little awkward after that, what with Mei trying to feed Utakata. Then Naruto suggested he do it and even then, it was still awkward. Sasuke suggested they just free Utakata of his bindings, but Ao quickly shot that down.

"It's not as if he can do anything, with Kakashi around." Did Sasuke just…oh my gosh, I think that's one of the rare times Sasuke is actually open about his trust in a person's ability. It's always an eye-opener, and, not to mention, a huge boost to one's self-esteem.

Kakashi sure looked proud… "I'll make sure of that."

"See? It's gonna be okay, dattebayo!" Naruto was trying to be positive for Utakata, who was still trying to figure out his situation.

Being part of Kirigakure and having to deal with such a situation that conflicts with the usual way of life must be mind-boggling. I mean, if it was enough for Utakata to question why he was still alive…

And that is basically how we made room for one more at the table. Utakata might have been quiet, but he seemed somewhat calm—maybe even looked a bit content to be accepted.

I wonder what the Rokubi is…
Utakata was still rather wary after that. He still had to be restrained, but it was mostly as a precaution because people took Utakata's return a little negatively. You had adults bringing their children back into their houses, people closing up their shops just seeing the poor guy pass by, and then there were a few children who tried throwing rocks at Utakata.

Of course, Naruto was pissed off immensely and tried to defend Utakata…but Mei beat him to it.

"I am truly ashamed at how the people of Kirigakure act toward a man who has served our village loyally—who has protected and served us—before you all pushed him out of the village." Mei had looked so disgusted. "For someone like him to turn away from the village he once protected is just something that shows how low we have fallen. Instead of treating him like this, you should be welcoming him back…because I am."

Mei's little speech struck a chord within the people of Kirigakure. To see the Godaime Mizukage defend someone who was seen as the village pariah is quite the eye-opener. In fact, you had children who were throwing rocks at Utakata walking over to the man and apologizing right to his face for what they had done. A little girl even gave Utakata her toy shuriken as a way of saying sorry for how her parents had treated him.

A lot of change was happening to Kirigakure and I think it's amazing we were here to see it. Naruto certainly seemed content, if a bit envious, but he mostly just patted Utakata on the back and said, "It's going to get better, dattebayo!"

Utakata took one look at Naruto and smiled. "You might just be right…"

It was sad to say that all good things must come to an end eventually. During our last remaining days, Naruto and Utakata bonded rather nicely, with Suigetsu and Chōjūrō taking the time to acquaint themselves with one of their village's jinchuuriki. Sasuke was nearby, not taking his chances with Utakata, but eventually allowed himself to lower his guard a notch.

Utakata had a rather interesting time with Naruto's fox kits and, overall, had a rather good time spending it with us—people who treated him like a person from the very start, even knowing he was a jinchuuriki. He rarely talked, preferring to listen and just enjoy the moment.

On the day we left on the Lapis Lazuli, Suigetsu was trying his hardest not to cry, but failed. Chōjūrō tried comforting Suigetsu, only to get snapped at by him. Ao was about ready to criticize Chōjūrō's actions and Suigetsu's reaction, but Mei put an end to it before it could even begin. Kakashi was making sure we had everything on us—that we didn't leave anything behind at the inn. Zabuza was mostly at Haku's side, saying something to the boy that made him smile and nod.

Sasuke was already talking about switching out of Kakashi's clothes and ditching the mask the immediate moment he headed back to his and Naruto's room. And I was just mostly waving and saying goodbye to the people we had met. Naruto was doing about the same, save for the fact that he was struggling to keep his kits in one place. Independent kits were probably going to be Naruto's downfall at this rate.

I seriously wasn't going to like the ride back, but Haku said he already had medication on him for my seasickness. Here's to another week of being sedated…yay.
Mei, Utakata, Ao, Suigetsu, and Chōjūrō all stayed at their spot, even long after the *Lapis Lazuli* had started moving. They watched us leave, Suigetsu telling us to come back sometime in the future. Mei was someone who wholeheartedly agreed with Suigetsu's suggestion.

"We'll be seeing you!" Mei shouted. "You can count on that!"

"Hey—Hōzuki!" Zabuza suddenly exclaimed. "My name ain't Mochi—it's Momochi Zabuza!"

Having said that, Zabuza took out his sword from the sealing scroll he had on himself and dispelled the transformation concealing his jagged teeth. The look on Suigetsu and Chōjūrō's face when they realized the person who had been amongst us was one of the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist, owner of the Kubikiribōchō, was absolutely priceless.

Once the shock had passed, Suigetsu started screaming, "You better watch your back! I'm gonna take that sword from you one day—I can promise you that!"

"I'll believe it when I see it!" Zabuza yelled back. "I won't be going easy on you! Here's to hoping you take after your older brother!"

"Fuck off!" Man, Zabuza was good at pissing people off.

When I told this to Zabuza, he just grinned as he pulled out a roll of bandages from his pocket. "It's how I get people to stop holding back."

"I can see that." My middle-school band teacher was great at pissing her students off in order to get them to play better—which they did. Ha…I miss my time as a band geek in my past life…

"By the way, Chōko, you're rooming with me this time around," Kakashi said as he placed his hand on top of my head. "Haku will be with Zabuza…"

"Does this have to do with the fact that you and Zabuza are technically married?" Kirigakure customs are sure weird! But oddly sweet, if you think about it…

"Yes," Kakashi didn't hesitate to say. "That is exactly it. Now come along—I'm sure it's going to be a rough week for you. Let's try to get you comfortable before things get rough."

Wow, no wonder Naruto wants to call Kakashi, father…which must be pretty awkward, considering the Daddy Issues Kakashi must have in regards to Sakumo. Speaking of which, I should try not to trigger anything in regards to such for Kakashi. Don't want to get on his bad side, or anything—noo, **bad** times.

"Hey, do you think we're going to see these guys again?" I really did have fun, despite the disputes I had with Suigetsu. They were rather entertaining, now that I'm away from him…

Kakashi nodded his head. "Oh, I definitely think so…now let's go."

…

The ride back to the Land of Fire went as well as I had expected it to be. Seasickness still sucked, the medication kept me sedated, and Naruto's kits were causing chaos—what? Yeah, independence really did up the difficulty in Naruto's life when it came to being a parent for nine fox kits. Every once in a while, I would way up to hearing Naruto calling out to one of his fox kits—Kurama's name seemed to be the name called out the most, which I found oddly hilarious.

Seriously, that decision is definitely going to bite me in the future, but I just don't give a damn.
Unlike the ride to Kirigakure, the ride had only lasted seven days and I was quite pleased to be back on land when we disembarked. Captain Mikuri was a little sad to see us go, because we really did grow on him, but he did say that, in the future, he would always be there to give us a ride. Kakashi really appreciated the offer and said he would keep it in mind.

When we had disembarked, it was quite early in the morning. Without any need for darkness to conceal our previous missing-nin associate and his dependant, we could pretty much just move on forward, without taking any breaks. We managed to make it to Konoha by the time the sun was starting to rise.

Kotetsu and Izumo were practically sleeping on each other when we came across them. It must really suck to get work so early in the morning, but I guess that's what the life of a Chuunin entailed…

Chuunin…those exams are still going to be an issue, but I can worry about that later, for now, we were just happy to be back in Konohagakure. When we had arrived back at Naruto's place, the first thing any of us did was go to sleep. We didn't stay asleep too long, since we still had a mission to report at the Mission Assignment Desk, but Kakashi said we could do whatever we wanted to after that, because he was going to give us a month off.

It was a reward for all the hard work we had done, according to what Kakashi was telling us as we were making our way to the Academy.

"You've been through too much—you three really deserve a break." Kakashi smiled at us. "Besides, I promised Neji-san to make sure you guys were completely free on the day we had left, so a month should be enough for the four of you."

Considering that we've been doing missions for nearly five months, now, it was good to hear such news from Kakashi. Oh man, I'm *totally* going to spend most of it sleeping in!

"Of course, we'll still train, every now and then," Kakashi added as an afterthought.

I'm still going to sleep in, even if it means waking up in a tree, because Kakashi has done that at least once to me...the jerk.

The Sandaime was rather glad to see all of us back in one piece and told Haku and Zabuza to come with him once we were done with our mission debrief. By the by, it was thanks to Naruto's report that Kakashi and Zabuza's accidental marriage came into light, which certainly amused the Chuunin in the room to a good extent. The Sandaime sure got a good laugh out of it before leaving the room with Zabuza and Haku. Shortly after he left, Kakashi bonked Naruto over the head.

"What was that for, dattebayo?!" Naruto clutched his head in his hands as tears streamed down his cheeks.

"For bringing up a topic that should have died the exact moment we stepped into Konoha." Kakashi looked rather annoyed, and it was probably because his accidental marriage with Zabuza was going to be the talk of the town by the end of the day. "By the way—Chōko…go home."

I blinked a few times and nodded. "Y-Yes!"
"You can come over later, but you have to make sure you check in with your parents," Kakashi told me. "And don't forget to pick up your payment."

Yes, Dad…

…

…

I nearly bumped into Chōji as I was making my way to the Akimichi compound. After receiving a spine-cracking "welcome back!" hug from my older brother, we went our separate ways, since Chōji had to go meet up with his team. And when I got home, I received another spine-cracking hug from Mama. She was really happy to see me back home, safe and sound.

"You must be exhausted," Mama said as she looked me over. "Why don't you go to your room and go to sleep? You should rest up."

"I will, Kaa-chan…" I said before yawning and rubbing my eyes. Bluh, two hours of sleep is not enough for me just yet.

"Sleep as long as you want—just make sure to wake up for dinner." Mama smiled at me. "I'll be making your favorites."

Wait a second… "Does this include dessert?"

Please say yes—please say yes!

"I'll be making green tea daifuku for you." Mama patted me on the head. "Now go to sleep."

Dinner hype! It was certainly an extremely interesting time to be at the Akimichi clan dinner table that evening, when Chōza brought up the news he had heard from his coworkers in regards to Kakashi and Zabuza's accidental marriage. I honestly feel bad for Kakashi…not so much Zabuza, since I may or may not be slightly bitter about the haircut. Then again, I have Zabuza to thank for Team Spiky hair…

…

Come the next day, when I arrived at Casa de Uzumaki (I'm gonna start calling it that for the sheer amusement of how it sounds), Kakashi said to get ready because we were going to be taking a team photo today. I blinked a few times, grinning inwardly when I realized this would be a great time to do something interesting.

And so when Team 7 went to take a team photo, Kakashi was amused to see Sasuke, Naruto, and I mimic the way his hitai-ate was used to cover his left eye. I even took off my glasses for the occasion. There was seriously something about our team photo this time around that made Kakashi want to have more than one copy on him. I think Kakashi found it endearing how we were trying to be like Sensei.

It was enough for Kakashi to pull us into his room (which he rarely ever lets us inside of) and show us some of the clothes he still had on himself from the past. I was expecting to see more Young Kakashi clothes…I got a huge slap in the face when Kakashi handed me Nohara Rin's clothes.

"Sensei…why do you have a girl's clothes on you?" I'm not saying you wouldn't look good in them or anything, but… "Seriously, what the heck?"
"Coping mechanism," Kakashi simply said as he pulled out Obito's clothes and handed them to Naruto. "A way of keeping a part of my teammates on myself…it helped ease the trauma of losing them."

Not by much, from the looks of Kakashi's expression, but enough to keep him moving forward.

"Is that an Uchiha clan symbol?" Sasuke asked as he looked at the back of Obito's jacket, which Naruto was trying on—it fit him well, surprisingly.

"That's right—I never did tell you guys." Kakashi ran his hand through his hair. "Those clothes belonged to my best friend, Uchiha Obito. He…was the one who gave me this Sharingan eye."

"I've always wondered who you got your eye from…" Sasuke trailed off. "What was he like?"

"Maa, he was like Naruto—right down to sharing the same dream of becoming Hokage." Kakashi smiled, his right eye curved upwards.

"You must really miss him-ttebayo…" Naruto remarked. "Heey, can I put his clothes on?"

"It's fine by me." Kakashi certainly seemed nonchalant about Naruto trying on the clothes of his dead best friend. "You can try on Rin's clothes if you want to, Chōko."

Hmm…should I or should I not?

…

Yeah, I would be lying if I said I wasn't curious about how I look in Rin's clothes. "I'll be in my room—knock first if you need me."

"Be careful with those clothes—please." Kakashi seemed really attached to them. "And Sasuke, you can—"

"I'm already on it…I still have your clothes anyways." Sasuke tried to sound annoyed, but the smile of his face said otherwise.

About ten minutes later, when we returned to Kakashi's room, Kakashi used Shisui's camera to take a picture of us without giving us any warning. It was around that time that we actually got a good look at each other and holy shit, Naruto looks like a blond-haired, blue-eyed Obito!

…I'm a little slow, okay? Though, I was the one to have pointed out amongst my group of friends, in my past life, that Obito and Naruto wear inverted colors of each other. Of course, this was during a game session where I played as Young Kakashi and a friend played as Young Obito—oh man, that irony involving that Ultimate Jutsu Finish, ahhaha, ahhh…good times.

"In case any of you guys were wondering, here's my team photo," Kakashi said as he handed Sasuke a framed photograph.

Naruto and I were quick to look over Sasuke's shoulder for this. It was weird—seeing Kakashi with both of his eyes. Naruto was rather disappointed to see that Kakashi still wore his mask. As for myself, one thing I noticed is that Rin had facial markings…I had facial markings. There is absolutely nothing awkward about finding out you are the Rin expy in some way—nooope.

Okay, maybe it was, but seriously, I had almost forgotten about her facial markings—and isn't the Nohara a clan made up of medic-nin?
"They are indeed," Kakashi said as he brought his hand down on top of my head to ruffle my hair.

"You look cute as a kid." There, I said it.

"Thanks—I think you look cute as well!" Kakashi smiled. "Of course, I think all of my Genin are cute."

"You never said the Yondaime was your Sensei-ttebayo!" Naruto exclaimed. "What was he like?! Was he as awesome as people said he was, dattebayo?!"

Wow, this must be pretty awkward for Kakashi. Of course, all Kakashi did was chuckle and ruffle Naruto's hair.

"He was exactly as people say he was," Kakashi replied. "Namikaze Minato, Konoha's Yellow Flash, was someone who earned the title of Yondaime Hokage."

"Better him than that snake-bastard…" I muttered under my breath.

"I still can't believe you said that about him…" Sasuke snickered.

"What did Chōko say about Orochimaru?" Kakashi looked intrigued.

"Yeah, what did she say-ttebayo?" Naruto never did hear of my death-wish-inducing outburst.

"If I recall correctly, she said, and I quote, 'You're the Sannin that got butt-hurt because he wasn't chosen to be the Yondaime.'" Sasuke was definitely grinning after he had finished saying that.

"Did you really, Chōko-chan?" Naruto was shocked.

"I don't regret saying any of that…okay, maybe a bit." I mean, it pissed off Orochimaru to want little ol' me dead.

"That's my Genin." Kakashi honestly sounded so proud when he said that.

"At the time, it was extremely scary…" Oh man, those nightmares were not fun… "But in hindsight, it was pretty funny."

"Like how you punched Orochimaru in the crotch!" Kakashi brought up.

I made a face at this. "You're never gonna let me hear the end of it, are you?"

"Not while I'm alive." Kakashi smiled. "Anyways, let's focus back on the Yondaime…you know, he was a lot like you, Naruto."

Naruto's eyes widened slightly. "Really-ttebayo?"

"Yes." Is Kakashi seriously doing what I think he's doing? "The both of you have unconquerable spirits and fierce ambitions, and unwavering loyalty toward Konoha and their loved ones. The two of you also had a knack for creating questionable techniques…"

"What kind of techniques?!" Naruto was quick to ask, a bit excited.

Kakashi chuckled. "Nothing like yours—it was the complicated names he came up for them."

"Oh thank god!" Sasuke seemed relieved. "I was starting to question the Yondaime when you had said that."
"Hey, Kakashi-sensei—you never did show us what your Oiroke no Jutsu looked like, dattebayo…"
Way to ruin what should have been a touching moment, Naruto.

Kakashi stared at Naruto for a moment before narrowing his eye and saying, "Out of my room. You can return the outfits later—they look good on you."

It was shortly after saying that that Kakashi made a couple of shadow clones that were quick to pick all of us up and took us outside of Kakashi's room. As soon as Kakashi was aware that we were all outside, he closed the door on us, his clones dispelling themselves right after. I blinked a few times before turning to Naruto, looking at him with an expression that said, "You couldn't have waited, could you?"

Naruto laughed loudly as he rubbed the back of his head. "Nope!"

"Typical Naruto…" Sasuke sighed. "Say…you want to go around town in these clothes and see if anyone recognizes them?"

"The Nohara clan might recognize Rin's clothes, you know…" And that alone, in itself, would be awkward.

"We'll book it if that happens," Sasuke waved it off. "So…ramen?"

"Hell yeah, dattebayo!" Naruto was always up for some ramen and since the kits were asleep, that meant Naruto had the freedom to go where he wanted to, for the time being.

... When we made our way to Ichiraku Ramen, Teuchi got a blast from the past that nearly made him drop the ramen he was going to serve Tenten—by the way, we all had the luck of coming across Team Gai at such a place.

"Ah, such youthfulness!" Gai exclaimed. "For a student to look up to their Sensei!"

Gai was referring to the fact that Sasuke was wearing Young Kakashi's clothes—mask and all. Though, when Gai looked at Naruto and me, he paused for a moment…then smiled.

"You two remind me of someone!" I'm not sure if Gai was being oblivious or playing dumb…it was probably the latter and—

"Hi, Lee." Holy crap, please don't pop up in front of me so suddenly like that.

"Welcome back!" Lee exclaimed as he held my hand. "It's good to see you again after all these months, but I guess you can say distance makes the heart grow fonder?"

"That's absence!" Tenten corrected. "Say it right!"

"Also, I think your new haircut is cute!" Wow, Lee, trying to score some brownie points, aren't we? "I heard that a missing-nin cut your hair?"

"Yeah, and that missing-nin is living with us-ttebayo!" Naruto exclaimed.

"He's not a missing-nin anymore," Sasuke said. "After today, he and Haku will officially be part of Konoha, once the meeting with the council finishes."

Haku told me that the reason why the Sandaime had wanted him to pass off as female was because the council had already tried setting him up with possible matches to start having kids. With them
thinking Haku was female, it threw a wrench in their plans and I don't know why, but the fact that Hiruzen deliberately sabotaged the council's plans is hilarious. I wonder how that meeting is going, by the way…

I should ask Haku when he comes home and— "Hello, Neji!"

Neji said nothing as he pulled Lee away from me. He looked at me, his brow arching as he asked, "Did you get a new outfit…?"

I blinked and shook my head. "Nope—I'm just borrowing these for the day. In fact, we all are! These are the clothes of Kakashi-sensei's teammates when they were our age."

"I certainly noticed!" Gai grinned as he gave us a thumbs-up.

"You three sure do look a lot like them…" Teuchi remarked as he looked over us. "Sasuke and Naruto, especially…it's such a shame that Rin and Obito weren't here to see this—they would have loved to see you three."

Man, that is just a heartbreaking comment—Obito would have loved to have his own mini-me. I'm not so sure about Rin, but she'd definitely find Sasuke adorable.

"Hey, Chōko-chan—tell Neji-san what Kakashi-sensei told us the other day-ttebayo!" Naruto told me.

It took me a moment to remember that Kakashi was going to give us an entire month off. "Right—Neji, Kakashi-sensei gave us an entire month off since we were so busy. He did it so you had more time to spend with us!"

Neji blinked. "Is that so…?"

"Yup!" I nodded my head. "Kakashi-sensei said to make some time for us! Just let us know when you're free, I'm thinking of making lunch or dinner for the occasion!"

Neji looked at me for a moment before turning to Gai. "Gai-sensei…?"

"Do not worry, Neji—I will refrain from choosing any more C-ranks so that you may have time to catch up with your friends!" Gai exclaimed. "In fact, hearing that my rival gave his team some time off has made me consider doing the same for you three!"

"R-Really?" Tenten looked ecstatic. "Does that mean…?"

"Indeed!" Gai nodded his head. "But training will still be a thing and I still expect you to show up at our usual meeting place in the morning!"

Tenten made a face. "Oh…I see…"

"Thank you very much, Gai-sensei!" Lee certainly seemed happy.

"Though, I will give Neji a few days off since Kakashi did promise him time to catch up with his friends." Gai looked at us for this. "There is nothing youthful about keeping good friends away from each other."

"Why don't you guys go out for lunch or something," Tenten suggested.

Hmm…that does sound like a good idea. "Hey, what do you two think?"
"Lunch sounds fine," Sasuke said. "So long as it isn't ramen, because we're having that today. Fried tofu is fine, though."

Naruto pouted. "Fine…when do you want to meet up, Neji-san?"

"In a couple of days…?" Neji seemed so unsure.

"I'll make sure to send Neji to you, so don't worry." Tenten smiled. "And Lee, don't you dare intrude on them."

"Tenten—I am appalled that you would think I would do something like that!" Lee looked genuinely hurt.

"Just making sure…" Tenten stated. "Now sit back down—your ramen is getting cold."

And that is how we ate lunch with Team Gai…not as bad as it would have been, but then again, we haven't been around Gai and Lee for that long to exhaust us like when we were babysitting Michiko. "I guess I'll see you around…" Neji told us as he and his team were about to go their separate ways.

"Yeah!" I said. "Half an hour before noon sounds good…right?"

"Right."

Oh, I had almost forgotten about them. "Yeah, I did! They sure cheered me up when I was down in the dumps, getting seasick."

"It was pretty bad for her-ttebayo," Naruto remarked.

"I am seriously glad to be off that ship…" I huffed.

"Kirigakure was an interesting place to be, though…" Sasuke smirked. "Hey, Gai…"

"Yes, my eternal rival's student?" Gai looked at Sasuke.

"Have you heard of Kakashi and Zabuza's marriage?" Oh Sasuke, you are so evil!

Gai stared at Sasuke for a moment before tears started streaming down his cheeks. "Once again, my eternal rival has beaten me in something!"

"Do not fret, Gai-sensei!" Lee tried to reassure Gai. "I am sure you will find someone soon!"

"Don't worry…the marriage is only going to last until Zabuza makes the switch in villages," Sasuke brought up.

"The marriage was purely accidental," I added.

"Did you know Kirigakure has a lot of customs that get people married-ttebayo?" Naruto asked as if he had learned something new, which he did.

"Really?" Tenten seemed surprised. "I never thought Kirigakure would be that type of place…"

I shrugged. "Neither did I, but go figure…"

"What happened when you were in Kirigakure?" Neji finally asked.

"I'll tell you when we're having lunch together, okay?" It only seems fair, since we'll be doing a lot
of catching up then.

...  

...  

So far, Team Blast From the Past was going rather well and I managed to avoid getting spotted by a Nohara. Sasuke seemed to be getting a lot more attention from his fangirls, considering his masked appearance gave him a mysterious allure. Ino sure seemed to appreciate it when we dove into Yamanaka Flowers to escape Sasuke's fangirls...

"Looking good!" she told all of us, winking at Sasuke for an extra measure.

"If this is what Kakashi wore when he was my age…do you think he also had fangirls?" Sasuke was honestly curious.

"I think he might have, dattebayo…" Naruto wasn't too sure.

"By the way, hello Ino!" It's good to see you again! "We're back in Konoha!"

"Oh, I could tell." Ino smiled as she walked out behind the counter to give me a hug. As we were hugging, she whispered into my ear, "So did Kakashi-sensei and that missing-nin really get…you know?"

"Yeah, but it's temporary and the whole thing was accidental," I explained. "Kiriwakure sure has a lot of weird marriage customs."

"My father told me about that," Ino remarked as she released me from her embrace. "So…I heard Neji-san gave you some flowers…?"

"Yeah, he did!" I smiled. "Speaking of him, the guys and I are gonna go eat out with him in a couple of days so we can catch up on lost time!"

"Really?" Ino arched her brow.

"Really…right Naruto, Sasuke?" I looked at my teammates.

The two of them were about to say something, but they stopped, looking a tad bit nervous.

"I dunno…" Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "I forgot about the kits-ttebayo…"

"Kakashi did say he was planning on building a pen for them in the backyard..." Sasuke said. "I'll be helping him out—it's the least I could do for what he has told us about...you know. These clothes..."

Oh…I see. "So are you really going to make Neji and I go on our own without you two?"

"Why don't you just bring him over for dinner, dattebayo?" Naruto suggested.

That…sounds like a good idea! "That would be a perfect time for Neji to get acquainted with Zabuza and Haku!"

"So what are you going to wear?" Ino suddenly asked.

I turned around and found myself looking at a rather giddy Ino. "Clothes?"
"Why don't you wear something cute?" Ino proposed.

"But I usually wear something cute." I crossed my arms. "It's called my attire."

Might not be the most feminine thing I've ever worn, especially since I'm pretty much wearing the same clothes as Chōji, but I'd be lying if I said they weren't comfortable.

Ino laughed. "I will go through your closet and make you wear that kimono if you can't find anything else."

Oh shit…not the Saionji kimono— "Fine, I'll wear that dress Haku got me!"

"Good!" Ino smiled innocently. "Tell me how it goes when it's all over."

I don't see what's so damn interesting about Neji and I catching up…okay, maybe hearing about the fact that we met Kirigakure's jinchuuriki was interesting enough. "We'll see…"

…

…

By the time we got back home, which was sometime in the late afternoon, Zabuza and Haku were already home. At first glance, nothing seemed too off…then we noticed the particular hitai-ate on Haku's forehead.

"Is that…?" I was at a loss for words.

Zabuza seemed extremely proud as he placed his hand on Haku's shoulder. "Guess who made Genin?"

"I am no longer a civilian!" Haku smiled. "Your Hokage tested me as soon as the meeting was over and handed me this hitai-ate. I look forward to serving your village!"

"That we have no plans of ever leaving," Zabuza added. "It's peaceful enough and lacks all the customs that made Kirigakure a difficult place to live in…"

"Not a fan of your village's customs?" Sasuke smirked.

Zabuza looked blankly at Sasuke. "You try having to avoid would-be-suitors trying to trick you—there's a reason why I was always at Mei's side!"

"And yet you got married to Kakashi-sensei…" Naruto remarked.

"Brat, if you don't drop it now, I will make sure you'll regret it." Zabuza glared at Naruto.

"You try anything funny and you guys have to find a new place to live in," Kakashi said as he made his way downstairs. "Even though this is Naruto's house, I still have a say in who gets to stay here…for the most part."

"Yeah, about that…unlike Haku, I'm on probation for a month, so you'll be keeping an eye on me…" Zabuza said as he handed Kakashi a scroll.

When Kakashi opened the scroll, he looked over it, his expression blank. Once he was done reading the contents, he looked at Zabuza and narrowed his eye. "Try anything funny and you'll be sleeping outside."
"Wow, you definitely sound like a married couple-ttebayo!" Naruto, stop pissing off Zabuza!

"Permission to hit your Genin over the head?" Zabuza looked at Kakashi.

Kakashi sighed. "Permission granted—try not to give him a concussion."

"With pleasure!" Zabuza laughed.

"Oww!" Naruto yelped.

…

…

A couple of days have passed since then. Life had certainly gotten interesting, now that Haku was a Konoha-nin. One of the things he had told us was that he had been assigned to a team.

"I'll be meeting them sometime tomorrow," Haku told me as he helped tie my pinafore, because I was going to be wearing the Viola dress (as I have nicknamed it) for the lunch meeting I was going to have to go alone with Neji for…because Sasuke and Naruto were unable to come, after all.

Sasuke was in fact helping Kakashi out with building a pen for the foxes outside in the backyard and the kits were completely awake, with Naruto having his hands full with them.

"I wish you good luck with your teammates and Jounin-sensei!" I smiled at Haku before thanking him.

It was at that moment that we heard someone knocking on the door.

"That must be Hyuuga-san…" Haku's smile looked a bit strained for some reason, but I didn't really think too much about it.

"I'll get the door…thanks again for helping me out!" Maybe now, Ino will get off my case…

…

When I opened the door, I was expecting to see Neji. Instead, what I got was an extremely pale-skinned boy with black hair and black eyes who was wearing the fakest smile I had ever seen.

"Hello, is this where Hatake Kakashi lives?" the boy asked.

I don't know what the hell is going on, but something must have fucking deviated in order for freaking Sai to show up three years before his actual appearance.

Chapter End Notes

Told you this chapter would be longer than the one before it! :3

So basically, in this chapter, you get the appearance of Utakata, who is definitely still alive and not dead and confession time—Mei and Utakata were, previously, characters I only knew of because of a Naruto game, which I have since gotten better at…I play a mean Utakata. :3
That aside, you guys really took me seriously last chapter when I suggested Zabuza/Kakashi—I just wanted to see who and who shipped the pairing, dang it! I plan on keeping Kakashi single, for various reasons aside from personal. The next time I suggest a crack pairing, unless chemistry exists (which you will know), then don’t take me seriously! :C

In any case, the kits have been named and yes, there are many references that come with them. Try to point them out, because all of them, including Ryuuichi (just look up his name), are there! Of course, the Jojo one is obvious, but yeah… Kurama may or may not be an exception, but aside from that, Chōko deliberately named the red fox Kurama.

So Team Blast From The Past is a thing—you got Sasuke continuing to wear Young Kakashi’s clothes—mask and all. Then there’s Naruto wearing Obito’s clothes, and finally, you have Chōko wearing Rin’s clothes. I hope that’s enough of a mental image for all of you and I was sadly disappointed to find out that Sasuke in Young Kakashi’s clothes wasn’t a thing—I really hope Naruto in Obito’s clothes is a thing because I have a MIGHTY NEED (*HINT* *HINT*).

I also made the family, whatever Rin was part of, a clan of medic-nin, because why not? And the engagement and marriages are off—and Chōko never found out about hers, by the way! Oh, and there was a reference when it came to the red kimono.

And if you can’t tell, Haku is still a tad bit jealous, even though the engagement is over. I hope you don’t mind the cliffhanger I gave you guys with Sai, but yeah, his presence is a result of a divergence. Speaking of which, it might not seem apparent, but more divergences are occurring. Once you reach the point of normalization, you will see how this comes into play…that is all I can say and for this point, normalization is the Chuunin exams.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, because I sure did! So until next time everyone!
**Reunion**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My first reaction to seeing Sai was to close the door in front of his face. I then quickly opened the door again, hoping what I had seen was a hallucination of some sort. Sadly, Sai was still there, along with the same fake smile on his face. I'm surprised his stomach wasn't exposed with the black clothes (a long-sleeved shirt and pants) he was wearing, but eh, he's like, what…thirteen, right now?

There's something about young Sai that I would find cute, but that smile is really killing it. Like—please stop…

"You are so creepy…” I didn't even bother holding back what was on my mind. "Stop smiling if you can't smile for real!"

"But aren't you suppose to smile at people you just met?” Sai, did you get a freaking book—oh my god, he did. "It's nice to meet you, by the way. I am Sai, and you are?”

"Akimichi Chōko…why are you here?” Please…enlighten me so I may try to speculate the possible deviations that could have brought you here.

"I should probably be the one to explain that.” I nearly screamed when another person appeared right next to Sai so suddenly. I nearly screamed again when I realized that person was Yamato—what the hell happened?!

Wait, would it be Yamato or Tenzō…should I care? I mean, it's still the same person, who is also here three years too early! Oh god, I can't even begin to think of how I'm supposed to react to this!

SLAM!

I ended up slamming the door shut. When it came to my attention to what I had just done, I felt extremely awkward…and did the first thing that came into my head.

"Sensei!” I yelled. "There's a ghost and a strange man at our door!”

Well, there goes that first impression with those two, but fuck it—they caught me by surprise! I was prepared to go have lunch with Neji—not deal with this shit!

…

"I apologize for the way my Genin has acted towards you two,” Kakashi said as he patted me on the head. "She's not used to being alone around people she doesn't know.”

"Oh, it's quite fine,” Yamato (Tenzō—whatever) assured. "It's our fault for appearing so suddenly.”

You damn right it is!

"What brings you two here, anyways?” Kakashi looked questioningly at Yamato and Sai. "Wait…don't tell me…”

"The Sandaime sent us here.” Sai smiled his fake smile—damn, that's gonna need a shit-ton of work. "Yamato-san should have the scroll.”
"Indeed I do," Yamato said as he pulled out a scroll and handed it to Kakashi. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't expecting us to meet again under these circumstances."

Kakashi opened the scroll and looked over its contents. "Likewise…Yamato, was it?"

"Correct, Senpai!" Yamato smiled.

I'm not even gonna ask, at this— "Why are you looking at me?"

"Meganekko!" Sai simply said.

I blinked a few times and narrowed my eyes. "Chōko…it's Chōko."

"Ahh, he's not good at making friends, so he's been referring to a book." Yamato rubbed the back of his head. "He's trying to give you a nickname."

Ah…well, that explains it. "Friends, huh?"

"The Sandaime said it would be good if I made some friends." Ahh, so that's why!

"Wait…the Sandaime?" Don't tell me…

"That's right, Chōko—they're here to live with us," Kakashi said as he closed the scroll. "It's a good thing this house has quite a lot of empty rooms, or this would have been a problem."

For some reason, Kakashi seems annoyed…maybe it has to do with the fact that Haku and Zabuza had recently moved in—yeah, that sounds about right. Wow, this house is getting more and more people.

KNOCK! KNOCK!

Okay, that's has to be Neji! "I'll get it!"

And just in time, too, because Haku, Zabuza, Naruto, and Sasuke decided to finally check in on our unexpected guests. I'd rather not be here for whatever awkward interactions come out of it—as entertaining as they may be. I just…I need time to prepare and I'm starting to get hungry. The last thing I want is for my stomach to growl and have everyone staring at me, making me blurt out, "Food!" or "Eat!"

"Who's here?" Neji tried to look inside the house, but I quickly pushed him out of the house, making sure to close the door behind me after I did.

"I'll tell you when we get to the restaurant…the usual place?" And by the usual place, I mean a restaurant run by my clan. "I know you like herring soba."

"What about Naruto and Sasuke?" Neji asked.

"Yeah…they're busy…" Naruto has to be a parent, and Sasuke should be working on the pen with Kakashi, but with Sai and Yamato making their early appearances…everyone's currently preoccupied with them. "And if you're wondering about the dress, Ino threatened to go through my closet and force me into the kimono if I didn't wear something different."

Neji nodded his head. "You look nice."

"Thanks!" I smiled. "Haku got it for me!"
Neji stared at me for a moment before looking away. "Let's go."

"So I'm assuming you had a nice break from training with Gai-sensei, am I right?" I asked Neji once we started making our way into town.

"You are correct..." Neji replied without once looking at me.

The heck? "Are you in a bad mood?"

"No, I'm fine." Aww, he is!

"C'mon, Neji—smile!" I prodded Neji in the cheek, laughing afterwards. "You look nice when you smile. Or maybe you want to talk about your feelings? Yes...no?"

"Can we just focus on getting to the restaurant?" Neji looked at me, wearing a slightly annoyed expression on his face.

"Do you need a hug?" You sure do look like you need one.

"No—I'm fine, it's just..." Neji sighed. "It's complicated...it's why I do not wish to talk about my feelings."

Ahh, I see! "Thanks for being honest with me! Though, if you have something to talk about, you ought to tell someone—don't keep it all inside."

*Because trust me—it'll just make everything worse...*

"I understand." Neji seemed calmer now. "Oh, and I never did say it, but...happy birthday."

I blinked a few times and smiled. "A little late, but thank you!"

... 

... 

"So then this little shit, Suigetsu, decides it would be funny to steal my masago nigiri, even though I told him not to because I was going to hurt him!" I ranted on before taking a bite out of my pork bun. 

By now, Neji and I were eating at an Akimichi clan restaurant, the both of us seated at a booth. I took a moment to chew before swallowing and continuing, "Like, what the hell—did I do something wrong? Was he still mad at me for that indirect kiss, even though I should be the one pissed off because it was his straw I drank out of—"

"Indirect kiss?" Neji looked at me questioningly.

"I drank out of his water bottle and Naruto made a comment about an indirect kiss, and he pretty much made both Suigetsu and I feel really awkward!" I felt my cheeks heating up as the memory popped up in mind. "He did the same damn thing when the Godaime Mizukage gave me some food using her chopsticks—has Naruto been reading some romance novels or something?"

At this point, it's really the only thing explaining why Naruto acted the way he did.

"Hinata-sama has mentioned a series she and Naruto have been invested in..." Neji mentioned. "Though, it's more of a manga than novel..."

"Wow, really?" I was just saying stuff, but holy crap.
"As ridiculous as it sounds…it's true." Neji sighed. "Hinata-sama had me buy her the latest volume at the bookstore while she and her team were out on a C-rank mission."

"Aww, that's really nice of you!" I will never get over how awesome it is that Neji and Hinata are on such good terms, especially since it's something that doesn't happen until after the Chuunin exams in canon. "By the way…the Chuunin exams are coming up—are you and your teammates gonna pass it up again like last year?"

"Not this time," Neji replied. "What about you and your team?"

"I doubt we'll even have a say in it, considering how Kakashi-sensei is with us and with Naruto and Sasuke, those two will jump at anything to advance." Meanwhile with me, I got a lot to prepare for because of these Chuunin exams. Ugh, I am not looking forward to the Forest of Death… "Not so sure about how Iruka will react."

Oh, I know how Iruka will react! He's gonna be totally against it!

"So what else happened while you were in Kirigakure?" Neji asked as I sank my teeth into my pork bun.

"Hmm…?" I took a huge bite out of my pork bun, chewed, and then swallowed. "We met this man named Utakata and he…was more or less like Naruto."

"What do you mean by that?" Neji looked questioningly at me.

"You know how people stare at Naruto like he's done something wrong?" Neji knows very well how much I hate it when that happens. "Well, Utakata is the same…maybe worse? I dunno, a lot of things are changing because Mei, the Godaime Mizukage, stood up for him."

"Like how we stand up for Naruto?" Neji asked as he picked up his napkin.

"Exactly and—" I was cut off because Neji decided there and then to use his napkin to wipe my face.

"I apologize…it's a force of habit." And by that, Neji meant that he was used to wiping Hanabi's face whenever she had food on her face and before Hanabi, it was Hinata.

Going by that logic, it meant that I had food on my face and my face heated up with a blush from that realization. How embarrassing!

"Are you okay?" Neji looked concerned.

I just nodded my head and stuffed the last of my pork bun into my mouth. I didn't want to talk right now and Neji seemed to have gotten the message. We didn't talk for a good twenty minutes after that and each time our gazes crossed, both of our faces turned red. Unlike with Hanabi and Hinata, there was no familial connection between us. Just knowing that made what Neji had just done extremely awkward.

"I really am sorry for that…"

"It's fine…just tell me next time."

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…
Right after we had finished eating lunch, I dragged Neji to the grocery store to pick out some ingredients I needed for tonight's dinner. We had two new guests and I might as well make them feel welcomed, and since Neji is gonna stay over for dinner—

"You can stay over, right?" C'mon, Neji!

"Y-Yes." Neji looked rather strained as I piled up the products I took from the shelf onto the basket he was carrying.

"I'm thinking of making kitsune udon—what do you think?" I looked at Neji for an opinion.

"I don't really mind," Neji replied. "Anything you make will certainly come out delicious."

"Unless I'm experimenting." In that case, anything goes. "Hmm…I guess I'll go along with it. And don't worry—it won't be spicy."

"That's good to hear." Neji seemed relieved. "So who were those people?"

"Oh, right…the Sandaime sent two more people to live with us." I love how I just include myself into the mix, even though my actual home is at the Akimichi compound. "I don't know why, but I'm sure we'll find out when we get back…oh! And Haku is now a Konoha-nin! He seems rather happy!"

"Ah, so he is male…" Oh right, Neji didn't know—holy shit, I forgot about Kiba!

Eehh, I'm not sure how Kiba's going to react, considering it's been almost a month and he still doesn't know Haku is male. I'm mostly not looking forward to how Kiba will act towards us for not telling him and leaving him in the dark for nearly a month. I'm pretty sure the same could be said about Hinata. I'm not too sure about Shino, since his kikaichū pick up on a lot of things.

"He's a very pretty male!" I found myself saying. "He looks good with make-up—just like you!"

"Hmm…" Yes, yes, I know, you don't like looking like a girl, Neji… "Why was he passing off as female?"

"The Sandaime wanted that to throw off the council's decision to pair Haku up with someone to have kids." The council likes to play matchmaker with shinobi with kekkei genkai—especially if they're the only one of their kind in this village. Kakashi is seriously the only person standing in the council's way of preventing them from making Sasuke go to the many omiai they had planned out for the Uchiha.

I think that's part of the reason why the Sandaime had sent Kakashi to live with Naruto and Sasuke. The council is scary when it comes to matchmaking. I am seriously glad my clan rarely dabbles into arranged marriages—that shit is scary when you're not ready for commitment, yo!

"I did his make-up, by the way!" I really do like applying Haku's make-up. "He's pretty cool with wearing make-up, even when he's not passing off as female."

"What were those white carnations about?" Neji suddenly asked.

"Hmm?" I blinked. "Those? They were just flowers…He might have gone undercover as a hikkomi at a brothel, but I doubt even oiran are well-versed in hanakotoba."

"What if he was—what would the flower have meant?" Neji looked at me for an answer.
"Heehee, well, it's kinda awkward now that you bring that up." Unless otherwise, I really don't pay attention to hanakotoba, but since Neji was asking… "A white carnation can mean 'engaged to be married' or 'our love endures,' but I think I like the message I got from your sunflowers."

"My…sunflowers?" Neji arched his brow. "Ino told me they were fine when I picked them out. Is there something I missed?"

"They mean 'love and respect,'" I replied with a smile.

"Really? I just thought you would like them because of Himawari-sama…" Neji seemed a bit embarrassed.

"I really did like them!" But I never thought you would have picked them because of Hinata's mother—aah, has it really been seven years already? "Though, for future references, in case you're ever curious, you should ask Hinata about flowers. I'm sure she'll enlighten you."

Neji nodded his head. "I'll keep that in mind…"

"Okay…now let's go get some tofu!" I need fried tofu for this kitsune udon and I'm sure Naruto will enjoy this, since he didn't get his fried tofu for lunch.

…

When Neji and I arrived back at Casa de Uzumaki, it was quiet…too quiet.

"That's because I locked that emotionless brat with Naruto in a room," Zabuza said as he looked through a book out of sheer boredom. "I know that brat's type…"

"And what will be achieved through this?" I would like to know that.

"I locked the two of them into that room in hopes that the emotionless brat develops emotions and a personality," Zabuza explained. "And if you're wondering about that other guy, he's with Haku, currently out shopping for beds and futon—whatever floats his boat. As for Kakashi and Sasuke… they're in the back, finishing up the pen."

"Ah…" So I guess that means things'll be quiet until dinner…excellent. "C'mon, Neji—you're gonna help me with dinner!"

"Yes, Chōko…san." Ooh, so close!

"You'll get there!" I said as I patted Neji on the head. "Now let's make some udon!"

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It was certainly very lively come dinnertime, considering the two extra people at the table. Sadly, Sai had not yet developed a personality or emotions, but we'll get there. It'll take some time, but with enough exposure to Naruto and the rest of us, it'll hopefully undo the Danzō's conditioning. My god, I cannot wait for Danzō to die. He has caused too much grief and I'm still pretty pissed off at the fact that he has one of Shisui's eyes on him.

"So what brings you two here?" I found myself asking Sai and Yamato as a way to detract myself from my rage against Danzō.

"I'm not sure what the Sandaime was thinking, but recently, I've been assigned to a team of Genin as
their Jounin-sensei," Yamato responded. "Sai and Haku happen to be two of the three Genin who were assigned to me."

"I'm sure we'll all get along!" Haku smiled at Yamato and Sai.

Sai stared at Haku for a good minute before saying, "Yuki-onna."

Oh my god, is that seriously Sai's nickname for Haku? "Pfft—ahahaha!"

Yamato frowned. "You are aware he's male, right, Sai?"

Sai smiled his fake smile. "Yes."

"I don't think the nickname's that far off, apart from that technicality," Sasuke remarked. "Haku does have a way with ice."

"Hey, hey, what am I-ttebayo?" Naruto looked expectantly at Sai for a nickname.

Sai took one look at Naruto and said nothing. Looks like it's still a work in progress for Naruto… though, I do see Sai taking quite the interest in the fox kits scampering around the floor.

"So who is the third member of your team?" Kakashi asked Yamato.

"How about I bring her over tomorrow?" Yamato suggested.

"If you're gonna do that, give me a heads up of when in case I have to make dinner." I wonder who the third member of Team Yamato is… "Haku, Neji—stop staring at each other like that!"

Upon hearing me, Haku and Neji averted their gazes, looking somewhat embarrassed, but mostly miffed. Honestly, these two…what the heck is up with them?

"I sense a rivalry between these two…" Zabuza looked amused.

I was just confused.

…

I never did find out why Neji and Haku acted the way they did toward each other, but come the next day, I did finally get to meet the third member of Team Yamato and it was…

"Sakura!" I was quite surprised to see the pink-haired girl follow Yamato, Haku, and Sai into the house in the evening.

Sakura was just as surprised to see me—especially since I have not seen her in quite a long time. She was busy with her medic-nin training, while I was stuck doing tedious D-rank missions, a deadly A-rank mission, and a thankfully normal C-rank mission.

"Y-Your hair!" was what Sakura first told me. "Ino told me about it, but I didn't expect it to be this…"

"Short?" I finished for Sakura. "Spiky? I've been referring to this team as Team Spiky Hair because of it."

"Now that you mention it, all of you do have spiky hair," Sakura mused. "I think it's cute how you all match!"
"Anyways, so you're finally out of the Genin Reserves?" It's been a while since graduation.

"That's right!" Sakura smiled. "I think I've had enough training. Besides...I'd be able to advance even more if I was a Chuunin."

"Right...the Chuunin exams..." Wait a second... "Do you think your team will be ready in time for the Chuunin exams?"

"I won't make any promises, but I will ensure my team prospers while under my guidance!" Yamato is really a nice guy... "Besides, you need to complete a minimum of at least eight missions to be eligible for the Chuunin exams."

Oh, then Team 7 has definitely filled out that quota!

"We'll be starting our D-ranks, tomorrow!" Yamato looked at his team. "So be ready."

"Don't accept any babysitting missions—this is coming from someone with experience!" And with Sai being an emotionless tool right now, I doubt putting him around children would be... "Actually, never mind! I wholly suggest you go for babysitting missions—especially if it involves the Takemi triplets!"

Torture builds character!

"Oh, I heard of them!" Sakura made a face. "In fact, I've treated some of the Genin and Jounin who have had an encounter with Riku's teeth. How did you guys get through it unscathed?"

"Easy...Riku developed a crush on Sasuke." Sasuke is quite the heartbreaker. "From there, everything went downhill for the triplets until we made friends with them. They're quite nice when they're not being little shits."

"It sure seems that way," Haku remarked.

"Are children that difficult to care for?" Even when asking a question, Sai lacked emotion.

Ugh, I'm gonna have to put Sai through the Neji and Kiba method at this rate... I should go buy some stickers. Now the true challenge is learning when Sai is showing some emotion. Seriously, this is a lot of conditioning we have to fix with the poor boy.

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Since that day, life has certainly gotten interesting. I ended up buying a lot of stickers with smiley faces on them, hoping that Sai starts showing some freaking emotion so I can slap one on his hitai-ate (which is covering his forehead). Unfortunately, Sai showing emotion at his current age was extremely rare. The only times I could actually get Sai to show some emotion was through my cooking, which he really liked.

I'm gonna chalk that down as ROOT not having good food and if that is the case, then I feel extremely bad for Sai. Just how much has he and the other ROOT members been deprived of and for how long?

Then there was Naruto introducing Sai to Shisui's tree and considering that Sai also had an older brother who is dead... I'm just counting down the days before Sai decides to buy a tree of his own—does he even have any remains of Shin to do so? Ehh, I guess Ino can help him out, there,
considering her family does delve into cases where people were unable to salvage any remains, so
the tree stand as makeshift graves.

One thing I could do without is Sai scaring the crap out of me with his fake smile and appearing out
of nowhere at times. Like, what the fridge—I just wanted to get a glass of water, why were you
awake during the middle of the night?

"I couldn't sleep." And it seems as though Sai suffers from insomnia.

"…Sit down, we're gonna have a talk." Now I can't go back to sleep until I resolve this issue. "So
what are your hobbies?"

"I like calligraphy and drawing!" There's that fake smile again…

I slapped my hand onto my forehead and sighed.

…

Team Yamato seemed to get along and have great teamwork, according to Haku whenever he
brought up his team's progress, since Sai doesn't talk much, as he still is referring to the book for
guidance (though he does like to follow Naruto around like a lost puppy). The poor guy is just trying
to follow orders, but it's a concept he doesn't understand because Danzō’s conditioning broke the
little guy.

_Danzō seriously needs to die._

So while Team Yamato was occupied with D-rank missions, of which Haku and Sai have been
increasingly quiet about, with the exception of Sakura, who complains (and she has every right to
complain!), Team Kakashi (as we were now known as, what with another Team 7 in the making at
the Academy) resumed training. And by training, I mean I got stuck in a tree!

"Sensei, get me doooowwnnnn!" Oh god, one wrong move and it's a one-way ticket to the ground!

"You can do it, Chōko!" Kakashi called out. "I believe in you!"

"Stop believing in me and just get me down!" Why must it be so difficult to climb down, dang it?!

Meanwhile with Sasuke, Kakashi was in the midst of teaching Sasuke some Raiton techniques and
Naruto was trying to get his kits to cooperate. Naruto was set on turning his kits into something akin
to what ninken were to the Inuzuka clan. A lot of us were skeptical of this, except for Kiba, who
actually encouraged it and gave some tips about how it worked with him and Akamaru.

"By the way, why the hell didn't you tell me Haku was male?!" And there it is!

"You never asked!" I tried to weasel my way out of Kiba's wrath…keyword: _tried_. I ended up
getting tackled onto the ground by both Kiba and Akamaru (god damn, that little mutt hits like a
brick!).

Hinata ended up telling me later that the reason Kiba was a little more volatile than usual was
because he was still irritated from their last C-rank mission, in which he and Shino got stuck to each
other and, well…there goes another two first kisses.

"I feel really bad I was unable to do anything, but…they got me in my blind spot…" Hinata
frowned. Since graduation, Hinata had slowly been phasing out of her stutter until she finally
stopped stuttering. Hinata mentioned that Kurenai had helped her out of it, though the stutter does
return whenever she is extremely nervous or scared.

"It's fine—you just got really unlucky!" I tried to reassure Hinata. "It happens and I notice you're wearing that ring Naruto gave you!"

Hinata's cheeks lit up with a blush. "A-Ah, I-I…N-Naruto-kun said it s-suited me, so I…"

"No need to say anymore!" I grinned widely. "You do look nice in black!"

"N-Naruto-kun said the same th-thing." Hinata smiled shyly, her blush only deepening.

"So Shino, how are you doing?" Shino's been oddly quieter than usual—and yes, I can tell. "Are you still trying to get over the loss of your first kiss—oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!"

Holy shit, I never thought I'd see the day when Shino would ever blush that hard!

"Please do not mention that, Chōko-san." Shino tugged on the collar of his jacket, trying his best to hide his blushing face, but failing.

The Aburame clan is known for keeping a stoic demeanor, but let it be known that when they show emotion, they show emotion—stoic demeanor be damned.

…

…

"So how did your lunch date go?" Ino asked me seconds after I had entered Yamanaka Flowers.

"Date?" The hell, Ino? I'm not ready for romance yet! "We were just catching up—which we did!"

Ino pouted. "Hmph…so boring. So what are you in here for?"

"Wait a second…" I left someone outside of the shop. "I'll be right back!"

About a moment later, I came back into the shop, dragging Sai with me. Ino arched her brow at Sai, taking an interest in the pale-skinned boy.

"Oh, I haven't seen you around." Ino smiled. "I'm Yamanaka Ino, and you are?"

"Sai," Sai simply said. "Naruto said I could…get a tree, here?"

"Tree…oh, you mean those?" Ino nodded her head. "Do you have any remains or is this a memorial tree?"

"It's a memorial tree," I piped up. "You think you can find one that would fit someone like him? He lost his older brother like Naruto."

Ino took one long look at Sai and nodded her head. "I'll see what I can do…come back here in a few days and I'll give you some options."

"Do you hear that, Sai?" I light jabbed my elbowed in Sai's side, trying to get a reaction out of him. "She's got you covered! Now what do you tell someone when you're really grateful?"

"Thank you so much, gorgeous!" Sai said with a completely straight face.

Sai's comment left Ino blushing quite furiously as she tried to process what the pale-skinned boy had
just told her. Sai is extremely lucky Inoichi wasn't around to witness this, because Inoichi was quite protective of his daughter.

"Oh my god, Sai!" Don't tell me you're taking after me, now?!

"The book said compliments should be given to share the rush of positive emotions one feels..." Did Sai just admit to feeling some emotions? This calls for a celebration!

Smack!

"Oh, I got a sticker!" Sai honestly seems happy, but that smile is still fake.

"Apart from your smile, you're really doing well!" Zabuza will be so proud to learn that his method of locking Sai in a room with Naruto was actually working.

...

...

"Big Boss!" Oh my god, it's been quite a while since I've been called that by Konohamaru and—oh, Moegi and Udon are here. Looks like I came across Naruto at a good time! At least, that was what I thought until I was swarmed with little kids.

"I'm Moegi!" the pigtailed girl introduced herself to me.

I smiled at Moegi before turning to the boy who wore the same styled glasses me. He appeared as sickly as ever and my brain wanted to associate him as Gekkō Hayate's son, thanks to a certain abridged series. Ahaha, I can't believe it took me this long to make a—

"I'm Gekkō Udon," Udon said before sniffing.

—reference? Oh what the fuck is this shit?! Are you freaking telling me that the abridged series got one thing right?! I don't even know—that would mean Hayate and Yūgao were hella young when they had Udon! Then again...Kurenai's father, Yūhi Shinku, quite possibly has to be the youngest father I have ever come across, being only thirteen when his daughter was born.

It is surprisingly disturbing what war times can do to young shinobi...

I honestly shouldn't be surprised anymore...but seriously, what the fuck?!

"Are you okay, Big Boss?" Konohamaru asked me. "You don't look so good."

"I'm fine!" I smiled weakly. "So what's up?"

"Do you wanna play ninja?" Konohamaru grinned widely as he held up a couple of paper shuriken in his hand. "Or maybe you can show us how far you can throw these?"

I looked at the shuriken in his hand and took it from him. "These?"

"Heh, are you up for it, Big Boss?" Oh, Konohamaru is trying to get me to show off in front of his friends.

"Let's see what I can do with these." Paper shuriken are quite difficult to throw if you don't do it right, so I have to make sure I throw it right. "Of course, that does mean I have to chase you..."

"Oh crap..." Konohamaru's eyes widened.
Fast forward to five seconds later, I was now chasing after Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon, armed only with paper shuriken that Konohamaru had handed me. Following after me as I chased after the kids was Naruto, who was surprisingly without his kits…but that could be because he left a couple of clones back at Casa de Uzumaki to watch over them there.

I had never had this much fun playing such a childish game with children, but really, I was bored and they got me into it, so I hope they're having fun! They sure do look like they're having a good time!

"Ow!" Oh, looks like someone got hurt and that someone was Konohamaru, who had just finished crashing into a black-cladded shinobi with a…painted face?

Is that… "Kankurō?!"

"Oh, hey, it's you!" Kankurō grinned as he picked Konohamaru up by the back of his shirt. "Did you get a haircut?"

"Who did your make-up?" I smirked.

"Temari-chan!" Naruto exclaimed upon seeing the blonde-haired girl, who was now carrying a giant fan.

Temari grinned as she waved at us. She has certainly gotten a lot taller, but then again…she is older than us by like three years. "Hello again, Naruto—you might want to turn around. There's someone who's been waiting to see you again."

When Naruto turned around, he found himself looking right at Gaara, who was holding out a small potted cactus toward him.

"For you…" Gaara smiled.

Naruto grinned widely and took the potted cactus without saying another word. The two of them stood there for a good minute or two before they embraced each other.

"Hard to believe it's been almost five years already…" Temari crossed her arms.

"Yeah…so what brings you here to Konoha?" Did something happen?

"Didn't you get our letter?" Temari blinked.

"I got it right here!" And there's Sasuke, never too far away from any of us. "They're here for the Chuunin exams."

Oh, right…oh fuck! Is it time for that already? It hasn't even been a month—oh yes, it has, you dumbass! I remember us observing Itachi's eighteenth birthday not that long ago. I wonder how weasel's doing…

"So are you going to participate in the Chuunin exams?" Temari asked us.

"We don't know yet!" I proudly stated, even though I already had an idea of what was currently happening right now.

"Such confidence…" Kankurō laughed before placing Konohamaru onto the ground. "Now scram. I don't like kids."

"Wow, you can finally say that without being a kid, yourself." Took you long enough!
"Oh shut it!" Kankurō spat.

"Hey, what's the Chuunin exams about?" Konohamaru asked.

Moegi nodded her head. "Yeah!"

"Can you explain it to us?" Udon looked expectantly at Temari, who just shook her head and sighed.

"Listen up, brats, because I'm only gonna say it once," Temari warned the three before beginning her explanation of the Chuunin exams.

While that went on, I felt someone tap on my shoulder and when I turned around to see whom it was, it was Gaara. To my slight disappointment, Gaara was a bit taller than I was.

Am I just gonna stay shorter than everyone?! 

...

Oh, right—I'm supposed to say hello! "Hello, Gaara! It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Yeah, it has..." Gaara trailed off, though I could tell he wasn't done talking from the way he struggled to say something to me. I wondered what it was he was trying to tell me, but I really should have seen it coming when he finally asked, "Can I have a hug?"

And there came a hug that gave me a huge sense of déjà vu. I laughed as I returned the hug. "As shy as ever, aren't we, Gaara?"

"I missed you...all of you..." Gaara said before releasing me from his embrace. "Where's everyone else?"

"Somewhere..." Definitely not on a mission, that's for damn sure. "They're in Konoha, at least."

"That's good..." Gaara looked content, if rather exhausted...

"Have you been getting any sleep?" I found myself asking.

When I saw the brief look of anxiety on Gaara's face, I knew something was up, but I didn't really have time to ask anything because something else felt off. If I recall correctly, a certain team from Otogakure should be spying on us right now and knowing that, I turned around, about ready to look for said team, except I ended up seeing something else.

A team quite different from the one from Otogakure...one that was extremely familiar and yet not—and just what could that be? Well, I'll let a certain shark-toothed Hōzuki answer that for you!

"Hey flat one, guess who's back, aahahhaa!" Suigetsu practically cackled while Chōjūrō sighed. Their new teammate, one that none of us had met before and was quite possibly older than both Suigetsu and Chōjūrō, just shook his head in disappointment.

What...the fuck...happened?

Chapter End Notes
3-31-18 So just to make sure, I changed Chôko's height a bit, so if I made a mention that she's what Naruto was in canon...that no longer applies, because she's shorter than Gaara now. So yeah.

4-16-15 EDIT: So I have my laptop back and yeah, it was a battery issue—which has been solved, huzzah! That aside, I did as much as I could, but I doubt I'll be able to work in any more additions. At least, not now, but do keep an eye out for any in the future.

BAM! ANOTHER CLIFFHANGER, YEAH! Also, credit goes to PolkaPox for the smiley face stickers and Sai getting the same treatment as Neji and Kiba!

Okay, confession time, I wrote this chapter waiting for this laptop to get backed up because I gotta take it in at Best Buy to get repaired, because of issues involving this laptop STAYING on when it's plugged in. Hopefully, it gets resolved soon, so here's a chapter to pass the time and give you an update of where I stand!

Be warned...I have not slept at all as I type this—it's almost 8 AM and I am sleep-deprived. Please tell me if I have made any mistakes, because holy crap, there might be a lot of them in this chapter.

That aside, I think it’s pretty self-explanatory as to why Sai had made an early appearance—the same could be said about Yamato and guess who’s back from the Genin Reserves?! Haruno Sakura—you didn’t think I’d forget about her? Hell no—I was waiting for this arc to finally pop up because Sakura deserved her time to shine and trust me, she will have her time.

That aside, Team Ao is in Konoha—it was foreshadowed in the previous chapters, the biggest one being when Mei got a scroll from Kakashi. I’ll get into that in the next chapter, which shall hopefully be longer than this one!

Also, Gaara’s back! A lot of you guys have been waiting for him, so here you go! Oh, and by the by, about Udon—him...that was me going, “It’d be funny if Chôko were to come across one thing the abridged series did as a joke and actually find out it’s a real thing”...Like, Haku being a girl was one thing, but I was like, NAH, I like canon! Haku the best, so I went with the next best thing...Udon being Yûgao and Hayate’s son. Also, if you do the math, Kurenai’s father was only thirteen when she was born, like HOLY SHIT, that is young.

So you guys got some Neji/Chôko in this chapter and, depending on how I see this chapter later on once I get access to a laptop with Word, I might repost it again with modifications...of course, only time will tell if that happens.

That’s about it for now and holy crap, I need sleep, but I gotta make sure this laptop gets backed up correctly because I gotta take it in today to get fixed. Uuugh, laptop problems... Hope you enjoyed this chapter and depending on how it goes, I might repost it again in case I want to add things or fix it, so watch out!

So until next time, everyone!
I don't know whether I should be shocked at the fact that Team friggen' Ao was in Konoha, or annoyed that Suigetsu referred to me as the "flat one" again— "Why are you looking at my chest?!!"

There isn't even anything worth looking at!

_Yet—because I have no idea what to expect once puberty kicks my ass into next week._

I'm mostly hoping for nice legs (because just about everyone seems to have them), so I couldn't care less about what happens in the chest area—so long as I don't end up like Tsunade.

_Please don't fuck this up for me, genetics!_

Suigetsu and Chōjūrō's third teammate seemed to have his regrets, based on his exasperated expression. "I'm starting to reconsider my decision to join your team for the Chuunin exams. At this point, I don't even care that I'm a twenty-year-old Genin."

"The Chuunin exams?" Oh, don't tell me…

"A-Ah…guess who was able to come?" Chōjūrō smiled somewhat awkwardly. "Sorry if it seems as if we came out of the blue—this is Kiri, by the way."

"He's our temporary third member and a medic-nin," Suigetsu added. "He's also the oldest of our team and still a Genin."

"Yeah, go to hell, Hōzuki," Kiri remarked nonchalantly.

"So your name's Kiri and you're from Kirigakure-ttebayo?" Naruto decided to ask Kiri.

Kiri blinked a few times and made a face. "Yes…that is correct—if you're going to say something about it, then you better keep your mouth close before I shut it for you."

Naruto stayed quiet after that.

"Who're you?" Oh, right…Gaara hasn't met any of these guys—the same could be said about his siblings, Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon.

"These are some guys we met while we were in Kirigakure," Sasuke was quick to reply. "We're not too familiar with Kiri, but we know Chōjūrō and Suigetsu."

"Why were you in Kirigakure?" Kankurō asked.

"I know!" Konohamaru exclaimed. "Jii-chan said they needed to take this missing-nin to get pardoned by the Mizukage!"

"Which is what happened!" I confirmed.

"And because of that, we have more people living with us," Sasuke said.

"Wait…Momochi Zabuza lives with you?" Suigetsu looked at us with wide eyes.
"Haku does, too!" Naruto piped up. "And Sai and Yamato-sensei!"

"Okay, what happened since you last wrote to us?" Temari asked with a stern look in her eye. This was honestly a lot to take in on such a short notice.

"You were rather quiet, even though we sent a letter to you…" A small bead of sweat rolled down the side of Kankurō's face. "Gaara was almost worried that something happened to you."

You know, I expected Kankurō to have grown used to being in Gaara's presence over these five years, but even now, Kankurō still looks anxious around his little brother. The same could be said about Temari, though it's more that she's tense than anything. At least they're not completely afraid of him—in fact, they seem rather concerned about him.

"Well, we have a lot to talk about, so we should go somewhere else…" Preferably, to somewhere where we won't cause a scene, because with Suigetsu around, that is something that's bound to happen.

"I don't think we should take them home—Kakashi might not appreciate having unexpected guests over." Sasuke did make a point. Ever since Sai and Yamato had moved in with us at Casa de Uzumaki, Kakashi's been a little irritated with any more people coming over.

"Let's just go to one of my clan's restaurants—you better not do anything stupid, Suigetsu!" The last thing I want to see is any of my friends getting banned from any of my clan's restaurants…and yes, I consider Suigetsu a friend—a vitriolic friend, but a friend nonetheless.

…

Suigetsu had gotten through almost ten containers of jello by the time Gaara, Kankurō, and Temari had heard everything about our mission in Kirigakure. It was during this time that the siblings had gotten well acquainted with Suigetsu, Chōjūrō, and Kiri. Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon had gone their separate ways, saying that they needed to be somewhere else. It was shortly after saying that, that Ebisu came running by, asking if we had seen Konohamaru, before running off in the direction Konohamaru and his friends had gone.

I'm guessing Konohamaru must have been skipping out on his homework or something…

"So you three are the Yondaime Kazekage's kids?" Suigetsu asked as he pointed his spoon at Gaara, Kankurō, and Temari. He grinned afterwards, showing off his sharp, white teeth. "That's cool!"

"Not really…" Gaara remarked. "Tou-san's been rather distant as of lately."

"And just when he finally had time to spend with Gaara…" Temari sighed in dismay.

"He'll probably be back to his usual self after the Chuunin exams are over." Kankurō tried to be a little optimistic. "He's probably just overwhelmed, since the other Kage are coming to Konoha for the exams."

"Wait, what?" Did I hear that right?

"Ah, that's right…the Godaime came with us," Suigetsu added as an afterthought as he opened his eleventh container of jello. "Your Hokage invited Kirigakure in the message you gave to our Mizukage while you were over."
"I don't understand why she went through with it…" Kiri let out a puff of air. "She only brought us along as her representatives, too."

"It's not so bad." Chōjūrō smiled weakly. "Think about it—it's an honor to be chosen to represent Kirigakure."

"Especially since you two are over thirteen and still Genin," Suigetsu said before shoving a spoonful of jello into his mouth.

"Is the pressure to become a Chuunin that high in Kirigakure?" Temari asked.

"Unfortunately, yes…" Chōjūrō frowned. "How is it in Sunagakure?"

"Extremely different…Suna prioritizes on the quality of their shinobi, so Genin can be as old as Kankurō, here, before they can even graduate," Temari explained. "The pressure on our shinobi is to graduate as early as possible to become a Genin."

"Holy shit, that's rough." Wow, Konoha has it freaking easy!

In comparison—that's not to say we don't have our own issues, because we do and they can fucking suck.

"Gaara was this year's youngest graduate, though…" Temari smiled as she reached over to ruffle Gaara's hair, only for her hand to meet sand. "Hmph, killjoy."

"I don't like being touched when I'm eating…" Gaara simply said as he continued eating his lunch, which consisted of his favorite food—salted tongue and gizzard.

"Heehee, you're just like Kurama when anyone gets near him while he's eating-ttebayo." Naruto grinned widely.

"Kurama…?" Gaara made a face.

"Oh, right—we finally named the fox kits that we saved while we were in Wave," Sasuke explained.

The most we managed to do before we left for Kirigakure was send a letter to Gaara explaining what happened during our supposed C-rank mission. We couldn't exactly tell him everything, since Kakashi said we had to keep hush-hush about a few things, like Zabuza and Haku living with us and the C-rank mission to Kirigakure. Though, now that everything is settled, it's quite fine to say it all!

Well, everything except for the fact that Utakata is a jinchuuriki—Mei made us promise not to say anything since it could put Utakata in danger. I'm guessing the Sandaime must have told her about the incident that happened on Shisui's sixteenth birthday… I'm just throwing shots in the dark, but I can at least assume that Mei is probably aware that Naruto is a jinchuuriki like Utakata, but chose to say nothing about it.

"Whoa! Look at the menu for this place!" Well, someone sounds rather excited and—oh my god, are those freaking Kumo-nin?!

*What the ever-loving crap is going on?!*

Wait…that's right—Kankurō said that the other Kage were coming to Konoha, which means that the Raikage is also here…

*Are these guys taking the Chuunin exams?*
It's honestly as good of a guess that I can make at this point in time. I don't recognize any of their faces and it's a complete understatement to say that we have long since passed typical canon events.

"What're you gonna get, Omoi?" A red-haired girl with dark, brown skin looked up from her menu at one of her teammates.

"I dunno, Karui..." A white-haired boy with a similar skin-tone as the red-haired girl looked rather cautious over the menu in his hands.

"Just pick something hot!" a pale-skinned, blond-haired male suggested to his teammate.

"That's easy for you to say, Atsui..." The white-haired boy, Omoi, sighed. "What if I pick something that I want, only for me to change my mind when it finally gets here? Then the chef will get annoyed and decide to kick us out of the restaurant."

I shouldn't be listening in on this, but this is just so interesting... You know, this is going to get hella awkward when the Hyuuga come across the Kumo-nin, like...remember what happened almost ten years ago...

OH SHIT—NEJI!

"Fucking hell!" Suigetsu swore loudly when I suddenly stood up in my seat.

"Guys!" I looked at everyone with a very anxious expression. "We cannot let anyone in the Hyuuga clan see them."

"Who're them—are those Kumo-nin?" Sasuke's eyes widened.

"Didn't you hear what we said before?" Kankurō seemed to be questioning our listening skills. "The other Kage are here and they came with their own team representing their hidden village."

"Doesn't that mean Iwagakure is here-ttebayo?" Naruto might have said the obvious, but his obvious comment brought up a point.

Doesn't Iwa have like this hardcore grudge against Namikaze Minato or is that just fanon? Fanon or not, I'm not taking any fucking chances because the last thing we need is Naruto finding out about his actual parentage before he is ready! Like no, that will just put Naruto in a situation where the enemies his father has made over the time come after him—that shit tends to happen when you're a shinobi! I am totally not exaggerating...

It's the reason why we're not supposed to expose our parentage or go into the specifics when outside of our own village. As nice as my father is, Chōza has made a handful of his own enemies over the years, alongside Ino and Shikamaru's fathers. I'm really dreading the day where someone asks me if I'm related to Akimichi Chōza—like, please no!

"Guys, I think we need to bring back Team Blast From The Past." At this point, I don't care if things will get awkward if I get spotted by a member of the Nohara clan! Worst case scenario, I get told off for disrespecting Nohara Rin's memory—which should not be a problem, so long as I don't do anything stupid...yeah, that's a problem, but fuck it! "Like, now."

"Team Blast From The Past?" Temari questioned.

"Kakashi-sensei let us borrow his and his friends' clothes from when they were our age-ttebayo!" Naruto replied. "Heehee, a lot of people got a huge shock when they thought I was the actual Uchiha Obito."
"Really?" Kankurō arched his brow.

"Yeah, there are a lot of people with guilty consciences around… I need to find out what was going on for Obito." Sasuke had a serious expression on his face. "Kakashi said he was a lot like Naruto—right down to the whole 'I'm gonna be the next Hokage' and so on."

"Is that so…?" Gaara seemed rather interested in Obito now.

"Though, Obito seems to be quite popular amongst the little old ladies who he had helped," I remarked, almost as an afterthought. "I wonder if he was ever late because of his helpful nature."

I'm just thinking out loud, but I think I shouldn't have because Sasuke looked as though he had seen a ghost.

"Oh fuck—I think I found out Kakashi's reasons for making up those excuses whenever he's late…" Sasuke almost seemed horrified. "It's a coping mechanism."

"How many coping mechanisms does he even have, dattebayo?" Naruto scratched the side of his head in confusion.

"As much as it takes to get over the death of his teammates," I replied. "And considering how much Naruto looks like a blond, blue-eyed version of Obito, I don't think Sensei'll ever forget."

Not while Sasuke looks like the Ghost of Christmas Past…oh, god—I still can't get over the fact that I'm technically the Rin expy.

…

Holy shit, is that why Kakashi acts so damn protective over me?! Well, then again, he's known us since his ANBU days as Hound and he's like a father to us, his Genin. Still, the thought he might see Rin in me is a little unsettling. Like—do I even want to know what was going on through his head when he saw me wearing her clothes?

It just makes me extremely glad that I ain't the medic-nin of this team, just no—fuck no!

"So can we go to your house now?" Suigetsu asked with a grin on his face. He probably wanted to see Zabuza and try to steal the guy's sword.

"You have no self-control," Kiri stated.

"Just try not to get into any trouble…" Chōjūrō was looking rather anxious. "Ao-sensei will get mad at us…"

"Not to mention, you'll give Kirigakure a bad name," Kiri added.

"Pressure on, Hōzuki?" I smirked at Suigetsu.

Suigetsu scowled at me. "Fuck off! You have no idea!"

Ohcrap, I didn't mean it like that—I'll just shut up, now…

…

…

You know, I don't think I'll ever be able to get over the fact that I can fit into Rin's clothing. Sasuke
just looks so used to wearing Young Kakashi's clothes, and Naruto doesn't have a care in the world in Obito's clothes—especially with his fox kits scampering all over the place. Gaara was getting well acquainted with the kits, Temari was resisting the urge to squeal, and Kankurō was just scowling at Kurama, who was currently tugging on the leg of his pants. Kiri was rather indifferent to the entire situation, while Chōjūrō seemed nervous—probably because Suigetsu refused to stay still. As long as Suigetsu didn't break anything, all was good.

In order to get Kakashi to lend us the clothes, we had to generate a laundry day in which we had nothing to wear. Kakashi did arch his brow at me, since I actually had a home with extra clothes. Eventually, he caved in and just told us to ask him next time.

I would have expected Kakashi to appear a little irritated, but he wasn't. Instead, he seems rather content to see us in these clothes. It probably gives him some comfort or something.

"Here's to hoping I don't get told off by a Nohara…" I'd rather that not happen.

"Hey, where's Zabuza?" Suigetsu, please tell me you didn't just spend the entire time you have been here looking for Zabuza…please. "Is he even here?"

Oh god dammit…though, Suigetsu does bring up a good point. "Sensei! Where is Zabuza?"

"Taking special classes to learn the way of Konohagakure Jounin," Kakashi answered as he made his way down the stairs.

"Are they seriously considering him as an instructor?" Sasuke asked.

"With how Haku turned out, Zabuza's a viable candidate for becoming an instructor." Kakashi walked right by us and plopped down onto the sofa. It was there that he then pulled out his *Icha Icha Paradise* from his jacket and started reading.

"You seem calm," Gaara remarked.

"Hello to you too, Gaara." While it wasn't that evident, Kakashi did seem happy to see Gaara and his siblings again. "Have you been sleeping well?"

Gaara didn't respond, but the expression on his face spoke for him. He looked so terrified—as did Temari and Kankurō. Though, the two were quite quick to speak for their little brother.

"He hasn't gotten much sleep because of the upcoming Chuunin exams," Kankurō began.

"Stress can do that to you, and since we're the children of the Kazekage, there is a lot of pressure on us…" Temari frowned.

"I see…" I could tell that Kakashi wasn't convinced, but he played it off as though he had been. "Well, Jiraiya should be arriving soon for the Chuunin exams. Oh, and the Sandaime requested our presence for an event this evening. Something about Konohamaru…"

Sasuke made a face. "Are you serious?"

"Motherfucker!" I thought we were done with these missions!

"Babysitting again?" Temari questioned.

"It seems like it-ttebayo." Naruto sighed.

"At least it's just Konohamaru…" Who really doesn't need a babysitter since he has Ebisu…"I'm
guessing Ebisu requested vacation time or something?

"By the way, I nominated you three for the Chuunin exams," Kakashi finally said as he held up three pieces of paper with his free hand. He didn't even look at us, his gaze still focused on his book. This was something he would regret because without any warning, Naruto jumped Kakashi.

Naruto was grinning from ear to ear, his arms wrapped around Kakashi's neck as he loudly exclaimed, "Kakashi-sensei! I love you, dattebayo!"

Kakashi's eyes were wide, his body stiff and his arms hesitant to even touch Naruto. Kakashi was never really one for spontaneous physical affection and considering how sudden Naruto had been, I'm guessing Kakashi had barely repressed his reflexes. "Hey, stop…let go of me…"

"O-Oh, sorry-ttebayo…" Naruto released Kakashi after that, making sure to give the poor Jounin his space.

Kakashi stayed still for a moment before relaxing. He sighed in relief and held out the applications in his hand to us. "It's just a nomination—whether you take the exam is up to you. Just make sure to sign the papers and turn them in at Room 301 by 4 PM tomorrow."

"That reminds me…we ought to get going." Kiri looked at Suigetsu and Chōjūrō. "Ao-sensei is probably waiting for us at the inn with our applications."

"Ah, that's right!" Chōjūrō nodded his head.

Suigetsu scowled. "Uurgh, I was hoping you two would forget…"

"Look, Hōzuki—Zabuza isn't here, and the only reason we even left the inn was because you wanted to see these three again." Kiri huffed. "You know, you could have just waited until tomorrow when we're turning in our applications for that, but I guess you're too impatient for that. So now that you've had enough time to catch up for the time being, we need to get going. I don't know about you, but I don't like being yelled at by Ao-sensei. C'mon, Chōjūrō—let's go."

Kiri didn't say another word after that and started making his way to the door. Chōjūrō looked nervously at his teammate before turning to us.

"S-Sorry…Kiri is under a lot of pressure to become a Chuunin," Chōjūrō explained. "Well…all of us are, but Kiri is the oldest out of all of us and…he's gotten a lot of ridicule for still being a Genin at his age. Suigetsu's not really helping, either…"

"I'll stop picking on him when it stops being funny." Suigetsu crossed his arms.

"W-Well…" Chōjūrō rubbed the back of his head. "We need to leave, so…bye, I guess."

Chōjūrō waved at us before going in the same direction Kiri had gone to leave the house. Now it was just Suigetsu who was left behind. He seemed annoyed at first, but then his eyes started to glisten with tears.

"D-Don't leave me behind!" Suigetsu followed his teammates out of the house after that.

…

"Are they always like that?" Kankurō turned to Sasuke, Naruto, and I for an answer.

I shrugged. "Who knows?"
"Still, they do bring up a point…" Temari hesitated to continue when Gaara looked at her. "U-Um… Gaara, remember what Baki-sensei told us?"

Gaara frowned. "Return as soon as possible after giving Naruto my gift…"

"I'm sure Baki-sensei doesn't need to know how long it took us to do that." Kankurō laughed. "Hey, cheer up, otouto."

"We'll be seeing them again tomorrow," Temari reassured Gaara. "They're not going anywhere."

"Apart from the Academy to turn in our applications," Sasuke added.

"But otherwise, we'll be here, dattebayo!" Naruto grinned widely. "If you need to go, then you can go! We don't want you guys to get in trouble or anything."

"Do you need a hug?" That always seems to cheer Gaara up.

Gaara looked at me for a minute before nodding his head. He then walked up to me and slowly wrapped his arms around me in an embrace. Not long after, I returned Gaara's embrace and it was there that I realized that Gaara was crying.

"I really missed you…" Gaara sniffed as he looked at me with the most heart-wrenching expression on his face.

My heart practically throbbed from hearing Gaara say that. "Aww, Gaara…c'mon, guys! Group hug?"

Naruto didn't waste any time and latched his arms around Gaara. Sasuke was much calmer about it, but it was quite evident that he felt the same way.

"Welcome back, Gaara…" Sasuke finally said it.

"Hanabi-chan will be happy to see that you're here-ttebayo!" Naruto exclaimed.

Gaara cried even harder after hearing that. After all, it was Hanabi's words of, "Miss you…" that had made Gaara cry almost five years ago.

When I looked at Temari and Kankurō, I wasn't that surprised to see them as anxious as ever. I knew something was up and the fact that Kakashi mentioned Jiraiya's name could mean only one thing…

Gaara's "sleeping problems" had returned. It was rather sobering…knowing something you couldn't really tell anyone about. I tried not to think too much about it, as it would only eat away at me, but really—when it came to Gaara, I was just concerned. A week from now, shortly before Kiba's thirteenth birthday, the first part of the Chuunin exams was going to begin. Along with that, a chain of events was set out to play and as far as I can tell, with Gaara's instability making its return, there was a good chance that Shukaku was going to make his appearance.

I just hope that Jiraiya will be able to fix this before that happens…

When Kakashi had told us the Sandaime had requested our presence because of Konohamaru, I wasn't expecting to see Ebisu running after Konohamaru, shortly after we were allowed inside the Hokage Residence. Like, what the hell—why were we needed if Ebisu is here?!
"Konohamaru refused to come along with me, unless you three were there," the Sandaime explained to us as we continued to watch Ebisu chase after Konohamaru. "Now that you're here… Konohamaru, look who's here!"

Konohamaru stopped in his tracks, almost causing Ebisu to crash into him. Of course, Konohamaru was at least smart enough to move out of the way before that happened. As for Ebisu, his face was currently getting well acquainted with the floor. Konohamaru laughed at the scene before turning his attention away from Ebisu. Upon seeing us, he grinned widely and ran toward us.

"Big Boss!" Konohamaru exclaimed.

I started snickering when Naruto looked at me with an annoyed expression on his face.

"Why are you still Big Boss?" Naruto huffed.

"I thought you always wanted to be an older brother?" Sasuke smirked.

Naruto scowled. "I did, but…why is she still Big Boss-ttebayo?!"

"Because she is still your leader," Kakashi piped up. "Now stop sulking, Naruto…it's unbecoming of a Genin."

"So I've noticed the return of Team Minato…" The Sandaime seemed rather amused with our outfits, which we still haven't changed out of just yet.

"You let your Genin borrow clothes once, and they'll want to borrow clothes again." As much as he tried to sound annoyed, Kakashi seemed happy. "It's not so bad…I hope you don't mind, but we brought the kits."

As if on cue, the nine fox kits jumped out of the basket Naruto was carrying in his hands. They were still small enough to fit in the basket, though keeping them inside was a rather difficult task. Thankfully, they weren't as difficult as they had been a month ago, with their curiosity and need to be independent. Since Naruto had started training the fox kits about a month ago, the kits had learned to stay by his side…or at least, everyone but Kurama did.

Kurama liked to wander off and cause trouble…I'm sure this is karma, but hell—it was still worth it.

"Try to make sure they don't cause too much trouble," the Sandaime told Naruto. "We have guests over."

"Guests?" Sasuke said questioningly.

…

A few minutes later, after the Sandaime had brought us to a room, we found out who exactly were his guests…and let me tell you, I was totally not expecting them to be the Mizukage, Kazekage, Raikage, and Tsuchikage. And guess what?

They weren't alone—oh, no.

"Bee, stop staring at the Mizukage!" That was definitely the Yondaime Raikage yelling at a certain Hachibi jinchuuriki, who was staring at Mei, who seemed to be enjoying the attention.

"C'mon bro, I got a pick-up line to go!" And there went Bee, rapping as usual. "Last Mizukage was a guy, now we have a hot lady that's super fly!"
"Bee-san, as a Jounin, you should be more aware of your current surroundings." Mei smiled in amusement as she placed her hand on top of the pink-eyed, hazel-gray-haired boy sitting to her right at the table. The boy appeared not that much older than twelve or thirteen. He seemed to be somewhat annoyed with the manner Mei was treating him—almost as though he had been a child. "Take for example, the fact that the Yondaime Mizukage is sitting right next to me."

Which Yagura was most definitely not.

"Man, don't be wild—that's just a child!" Bee seemed unconvinced with Mei's statement.

That comment certainly pissed off Yagura, who seemed to be throwing a silent hissy fit, based on his current expression. Utakata, who was sitting to Mei's left, seemed slightly amused as he blew some bubbles using his pipe.

"I can assure you that this child is an adult." Mei laughed as she patted Yagura on the head. "Isn't that right, Yagura-san?"

"I'm thirty-eight—definitely not a child." Yagura sulked.

"That's right, that's right, little man!" Mei giggled as she barely avoided having her hand swatted away by Yagura.

"Stop patronizing me!" Yagura snapped.

"It's difficult to see you as an adult when you keep acting like a child." I believe that is the Tsuchikage who had just spoken—and this is where my knowledge comes to an end. I don't know shit, now.

Hell, I don't know what I'm even looking at right now—just seeing a four of the five Kage sitting at a large table together with whom I believe to be their guards…with the exception of the Kazekage, who just has his children around him and—fuck, is that really Rasa?!

It was at that moment, that a familiar sound reached my years. It had been too long since I last heard it, but I wasn't exactly pleased to hear it again.

"Oh no…" I just broke the door…

"Ah, so the door-breaker returns!" Kakashi sounded so amused.

And just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, Naruto's fox kits decided to scamper into the room. Naruto loudly called after them and if my door-breaking strength hasn't already done it, then Naruto managed to bring all attention on us. Konohamaru did not help at all when he chased after the kits.

"Well, hello to you, too!" Mei winked at me. "Did you get a new outfit, Chōko-chan?"

"I-I!" I was at a loss for words, my face heating up from the way Mei had looked at me.

I was almost happy that the Kazekage (?) suddenly yelled out in pain when Kurama decided to sink his teeth into his leg.

"Kurama, no!" Naruto was horrified.

The Sandaime looked exasperated. Sasuke was just done, and Kakashi was Kakashi. It honestly just feels like another day in the life of us…with the exception of the sudden introduction of the other
Kage and a couple of jinchuuriki…who I know next to nothing about. I really regret not looking into the jinchuuriki before I died, because all I can really recognize, apart from Naruto and Gaara, is Yagura, Utakata, and Bee.

Speaking of Bee— "P-Personal space!"

Bee was literally in front of my face—he is so lucky I’m not armed! Like, seriously lucky.

"If you don't get out of my face, all that'll be left of you is a blank space!" Stay away—did I just fucking rhyme?! Oh god, it's contagious!

"I don't mean to be shady, little glasses-wearing lady," Bee said as he lightly tapped his index finger on one of my lenses. "You have style, and you might be guile, but your personality is kinda vile."

Is he literally assessing me? For what—get that finger out of my face! "Ack!"

Kakashi decided then and there to pull me away from Bee. "Now don't do anything rash, Chōko—certainly don't go biting anyone's hand."

"I wasn't going to bite him…maybe." Okay, I might have considered it—but that was just it.

"Pffft—ahahahaha!" At that moment, Mei burst into a fit of laughter. This caught Yagura and Utakata by surprised as they just stared at their Mizukage with wide-eyes.

The Raikage—Ay, I think his name was—seemed shocked. The blonde-haired woman sitting to his left was absolutely horrified. The Tsuchikage seemed somewhat intrigued with the current situation, while the men sitting to his left and right—a redhead and a really tall man—both seemed confused.

One could only assume the Kazekage was in pain, as Naruto was struggling to pull Kurama off his leg. As this happened, Naruto took the time to say hello to Gaara, who seemed happy to see him again. Meanwhile with Konohamaru, he was gathering up the fox kits, with a little help from Kankurō and Temari.

Bee had the blankest expression on his face, the Sandaime appeared nervous, and Sasuke was just baffled.

"Is there any reason why it would be a bad idea to bite anyone's hand?" Sasuke asked Kakashi, who sighed in exasperation.

I was assuming that Kakashi had just prevented me from accidentally causing any tension between Kumo and Konoha. Or rather, causing any more tension—I really have no idea what the current state of Kumo and Konoha's relationship is. Is there tension or not?

Whatever it is, I was wrong making that assumption…because my actions wouldn't have caused any tension—oh no.

Just when you least expect it!

"Biting the hand of another just so happens to be one way to get married or engaged in Kumogakure," Kakashi explained. "And unlike Kirigakure, age difference isn't that much of a restriction, but there is a limit in how young one could be. For Genin, that would be thirteen."

And guess who just turned thirteen? Yo.

"Oh my god…" I'm starting to regret ever laughing at Kakashi and Zabuza's accidental marriage,
now…because I nearly done got myself married!

"Now I see the hype, but you just ain't my type," Bee finally spoke.

_What the fuck is this guy talking about?_

"The Godaime Mizukage was talking about you before you arrived," the Sandaime explained. "I have you to thank for her participation in the Chuunin exams."

Oh god dammit, now I'll **never** live this down…

...

So apart from the fact that I nearly got my ass accidentally hitched to Bee, dinner **still** managed to be awkward because everyone now saw me as the girl who managed to convince the Godaime Mizukage to participate in the Konohagakure Chuunin exams…with the power of flirting!

_When did this turn into Dungeons and Dragons?!_

It was pretty much the reason why Bee was invading my personal bubble—he wanted to see just who was it that Mei had talked about so favorably. **Totally not awkward**—oh, as for why everyone was here, the Sandaime invited the Kage and their guards over for this fancy dinner (om nom nom) to commemorate a meeting involving the five Kage that didn't require a visit to the Land of Iron.

As far as anyone could even say, this is a complete first. And with introductions out of the way, I now know people's names…**yay**!

The Sandaime Tsuchikage was Ōnoki, who was surprisingly shorter than Yagura and yet, did not share a similar child-like appearance. He was also the oldest person in the room and goddamn, I did not think I would **ever** see someone older than Sarutobi Hiruzen, like holy crap—shinobi life goals of reaching the age of seventy-five, being a Kage, and having children and grandchildren.

Speaking of grandchildren, or rather, grandchild—Ōnoki's granddaughter was on the Genin team representing Iwagakure. His son just so happened to be that team's Jounin instructor.

As for the men who were with Ōnoki, the redhead was Rōshi, whose face was reminding more and more of a monkey's face, and the really tall guy was Han. Han…okay, he creeped me out with his height (the man was **huge**!), the fact that his face was barely visible, and his eyes just—they could stare into your soul.

Then Han started interacting with Naruto after he had handed the him Kurama. Once again, Kurama was being a little troublemaker, but Han managed to keep the red fox from biting him. Han was rather amicable, if a bit reserved.

The blonde-haired woman with Bee and Ay was named Nii Yugito, a name that sounded familiar to me, but I couldn't exactly figure out why. It was only until Bee revealed that he was a jinchuuriki in a rather blatant manner that it suddenly hit me.

These guards…they were **all** jinchuuriki. The reason Yugito's name had sounded so familiar is because I came across it while skimming through Bee's page on the Naruto wiki (oh, how I **regret** not clicking that hyperlink or looking into jinchuuriki in general). I could only count eight, but that was probably because Takigakure wasn't participating in the Chuunin exams. I have no idea what bijuu five of these eight jinchuuriki were containing, but as far as I can tell, something deviated…**again**.
Of course, there came a bit of a question in regards to Yagura...he was still alive, but does he still have the Sanbi, Isobu? It's a question that really brings a lot of attention to what is happening. For one thing, Tobi already relinquished his hold on Yagura, but considering what the Akatsuki have planned for the nine jinchuuriki...what happened to Isobu? I just...what happened?

This is probably classified information, of which only the Kage should know. Speaking of the Kage or rather, more specifically, the Kazekage...that is not Rasa. No—I just...fuck. I don't know what's going on at all...

...

According to what I'm hearing from Hiruzen, as he stated his reason for inviting the other Kage (as means of establishing official formality or something), it all started when two missing-nin infiltrated Konoha.

Naruto, Sasuke, and I got put in the spotlight for this, as Naruto was referred to the child who was used as means of convincing Uchiha Itachi to leave his village. Sasuke was referred to as the younger brother of Itachi, as well as one of the children involved in the incident, of which has been named the Children's Crusade.

It was called such as the main participants of the incident were children, of who were still only Academy students. And amongst these students, I was known as the leader—the one who took charge when things turned serious. It really was supposed to be a day commemorating what should have been Shisui's sixteenth birthday...but Orochimaru and Sasori changed all of that when they came to take Itachi.

While considered a traitor by many (and through legal definitions), Itachi was not referred to as such, because Hiruzen was of the same mindset as us—that Itachi was a hero. And since it had been Sasori who had left his mark in the form of poison on Hound (of which Sakura contributed greatly to the antidote as such a young age), it was through his involvement in the incident that brought the Kazekage and his children to Konoha.

And from there, something happened...what had originally been a meeting to discuss the Sunagakure missing-nin working alongside Orochimaru turned into something else when Gaara and Naruto made the decision to stay in touch with each other, despite the distance. Upon receiving an explanation from Rasa when Hiruzen had asked about the consistent delivery of messages between Suna and Konoha, Hiruzen thought of an idea.

The idea was to follow Gaara and Naruto's example, by staying in touch with Sunagakure long after whatever business had been conducted. And from there, Hiruzen decided to reach out to the other Kage in Iwagakure, Kumogakure, and Kirigakure.

I could have never guessed on my own accord that something that happened nearly five years ago could lead to something like this—a deviation where the Five Great Shinobi Countries were all present for the Chūnin exams. Sure, it was just the Kage with a single representative team of their choice from their hidden village, but if there's one thing I know about change, it's that this is a start.

And god dammit, it was a huge start. And to think, it all started when Orochimaru kidnapped Naruto...

Oh, and remember how I said he was forever screwed in Konoha, because of his actions and my clan's connections? It doesn't end there—no, it gets better.

The first thing Hiruzen had done when he had finally gotten in contact with the other Kage was tell
them of the Children's Crusade. And considering the presence of jinchuuriki in this room, Hiruzen most likely revealed Naruto's status as a jinchuuriki to them. Now what exactly does this information do?

It makes people think…what could happen if that event repeats itself on someone else? No one really wants to find out—especially if jinchuuriki are involved. To hear of such an incident, like the Children's Crusade, leaves an impression that sticks.

And for that reason alone, the Five Great Shinobi Countries are all keeping an eye out for Orochimaru, Sasori, and anyone that could be connected to the two—which could potentially include the Akatsuki, considering their attire. Again, it was all because Orochimaru tried to kidnap Naruto.

It really all leads back to Naruto, because, to be frank, had it been Sasuke who had been used as a bargaining chip instead of Naruto…things probably wouldn't have been the same. To be honest, why did they pick Naruto instead of Sasuke? It doesn't really matter as what happened, happened…and because of what happened, Orochimaru pretty much screwed himself and, quite possibly, the Akatsuki.

I guess you can consider this karma, because it certainly has been a bitch to Orochimaru. While some things have stayed the same, despite the deviations, it's easy to infer that things won't be playing out the same way they had in canon. And from what I can see, that is definitely Orochimaru disguising himself as Rasa.

It definitely showed when Kakashi brought up the fact that I punched Orochimaru in the crotch and the Kazekage was the only one who stayed silent while everyone else laughed. By the by, I might have not been a door-breaker anymore…but I was now a crotch puncher.

*God damn, this potato girl status…*

"With that audacity of hers, it's a wonder why it took so long for her to appear in our Bingo Book!" Ōnoki laughed.

Ahaha… "What?"

"Ch-Chōko-chan's in…what, dattebayo?!!" Naruto was just as baffled as I was.

"The B-Bingo Book?" Sasuke's eyes were wide.

"Cool! Big Boss's in the Bingo Books!" Konohamaru sounded so proud, while I was still trying to process what I had just heard.

"Ōnoki-san…Chōko wasn't supposed to find out." Mei laughed nervously.

"What the hell is going on?!" What the fuck man—what did I do?!

"Maa, it would be best to leave the explaining to me." A small bead of sweat rolled down the side of Kakashi's face.

...

"The Bingo Books…you gotta be fucking kidding me…" Even after I had it explained to me, I still couldn't believe it. Apparently, punching an S-rank missing-nin, who just so happened to be a Sannin, in the crotch at eight-years-old and living to tell the tale was enough to warrant attention from threat-assessing shinobi.
And ever since I've caught their attention, my progress has been closely monitored. By the time I had graduated from the Academy, I had become a potential candidate for the Bingo Books. The mission in Wave Country was pretty much the turning point where I finally made my debut as the Butterfly of Doom.

*What the fuck is up with that name?! C'mon—they can do better than that!*

"If it makes you feel any better, no one really pays much attention to D-ranks." Oh, you would know, Kakashi!

"Still, a D-rank rookie Genin is something you don't see so often." Kankurō's remarked earned him a slap upside the head from Temari. "Ow!"

"Idiot!" Temari snapped. "You're not helping!"

To clarify, a Genin is considered a rookie for the first year of their shinobi career. It's been almost seven months since graduation—the term applies.

"So how has everyone's day been so far?" Hiruzen decided to change the subject and actually succeeded.

Dinner sure became lively after that, though I still couldn't get over the fact that I made it into the Bingo Books—shinobi life goals? I don't even know…

At least Naruto was having the time of his life, interacting with Bee and the other jinchuuriki (not that he knew there were more jinchuuriki than just Yagura, Utakata, and Bee). Gaara certainly seemed to be having difficulty talking with Bee, but I guess that could be because Gaara was much like Naruto after he had graduated—except worse.

Poor Gaara feels as though he is living a lie when it comes to us—his friends. I'm just counting down the days before the truth comes out. At least now, Naruto can truly sympathize with Gaara…

…

…

Come the next day, Iruka was in for a surprise when Naruto, Sasuke, and I turned in our applications for the Chuunin exams. We probably caught him off-guard with our Team Blast From The Past attire, though, at the same time, he was probably conflicted with the idea that we were going to risk our lives in the Chuunin exams. He sure hesitated to give us the time and location for the first part of the examination.

A week from now, the first part of the examination would take place in this same room, with the same deadline as the application process. Any later and we would be immediately disqualified from the examination—application be damned.

"Good luck." Iruka smiled wistfully at us before we left the room.

…

Gaara and his siblings had been waiting for us outside of the Academy for us to finish turning in our applications. Not long after we had joined up with them, Team Ao decided to join our side. Kiri was rather reluctant to even tag along with us—especially with how much of a little shit Suigetsu could be. Chōjūrō was literally the only person keeping Kiri sane at this point.
We continued waiting for the others, taking the time to people-watch so that we could have an idea of who are fellow exam-takers were. Team Kurenai soon joined us, with Team Asuma following right after.

Neji had been quick to separate from his team the instant he and his teammates had turned in their applications and joined up with the rest of us. Of course, Lee being Lee, decided to stick around with us, with Tenten doing the same, as she had nothing else to do.

Team Yamato caught us completely by surprise with their presence and the fact that they had applications to turn in—Yamato had managed to do it. He had succeeded in getting his Genin to participate in the Chuunin exams within a month. Then again, completing eight missions isn't that difficult of a task and considering the type of Genin Yamato had been assigned (Sakura, Sai, and Haku), he was very much aware of their potential.

That aside, we were all very aware that there was quite a lot that we needed to catch up on, as well as people we needed to acquaint ourselves with. Before that even happened, however, Shikamaru decided to bring up an old title of mine for the occasion.

"Where to, Leader?" Shikamaru knew very well what he was doing and I just wished he didn't do it around Suigetsu.

"Leader?" Suigetsu repeated. "Wait—you're telling me the flat one is a leader?"

"I would really appreciate it if you didn't stare at my friend's chest." Neji seemed rather annoyed. Haku did as well, in his own subtle manner. "Just a friendly reminder that I am still curious."

Suigetsu cowered behind Chōjūrō after hearing Haku's threat. Kiri face palmed at this.

"What happened between those two?" Sakura was perplexed.

"A Yuki and Hōzuki confrontation…" was all Sasuke needed to say for Sakura to understand.

I might have vented about Suigetsu to Sakura…

"So how's the tree doing for you, Sai?" Ino decided to change the subject.

Sai blinked and smiled his usual fake smile. "It is doing quite fine…do I get a sticker?"

"I dunno, are you feeling anything?" When it came to stickers, Sai had really gotten into it. It was kinda cute…and was possibly another sign of his conditioning slowly coming undone. Slowly, but surely, progress was being made.

One day, we shall see the elusive Sai smile. Today is just not that day.

"I feel…anticipation?" Sai seemed so uncertain, but it was the effort that counted. Since he was eager for a sticker, I guess I could indulge him a bit.

Smack!

"Thank you, Meganekko!" And there was that nickname again… At least Sai looked happy.

"What's wrong, Neji?" Tenten suddenly asked.

"It's nothing," Neji insisted.
"Does it have to do with Chōko-san giving Sai-san a sticker?" Lee nearly got a palm strike to the face for asking that question.

"Neji-nii-sama used to get stickers from Chōko-chan, in case you didn't know," Hinata decided to explain.

"I used to get stickers, too—right, Akamaru?" Kiba grinned as Akamaru barked back in response. "I almost feel jealous that Sai's getting 'em, but…it's for a good cause, right?"

"Naruto-kun has mentioned that Zabuza-san locks him in a room with Sai-san occasionally, in hopes of Sai-san learning from Naruto-kun." Shino adjusted his glasses. "Apparently, Sai-san has problems with his emotions."

"You mean lack thereof," Chōji corrected before stuffing a handful of potato chips in his mouth.

"Heehee, it's been a while since all of us were together-ttebayo!" Naruto laughed. "Hey, hey—let's go see Hanabi-chan! Would you like that, Gaara?"

Gaara blinked a few times and smiled. "I would like that."

"To be honest, Hanabi is probably the only brat I don't hate," Kankurō said out loud as if he wanted to make a point.

"Huh, that's a first." Temari seemed amused.

And I was just content to see nothing much has really changed—well, apart from the recent addition to this circle of friends. Kiri ended up getting dragged along with us—whether he wanted to or not. Suigetsu had already accepted his position, with Chōjūrō being as compliant as ever. Sai was someone who would most definitely benefit from this experience and Haku…he seemed content.

"I actually feel wanted," is what Haku told me when I had commented on his expression. "It's a nice feeling."

It took every bit of will power to keep myself from crying after hearing Haku say that. Feels—stop…not now!

"So I guess we're heading to the Hyuuga compound…" I looked at Hinata and Neji for a confirmation of some sort.

"Otou-sama might not approve of strangers, but…" Hinata trailed off.

"I am sure he will make exceptions," Neji finished for his cousin. He seemed slightly irritated at this, but it was probably because he was looking at Haku.

I don't think I'll ever understand what is going on between Haku and Neji, but for now, to the Hyuuga compound we go!

…

When Hinata brought Hanabi into the room all of us were in, it took Hanabi a couple of seconds to register that people she had met when she was much younger had returned. It was Gaara who Hanabi had embraced first.

"Gaa!" At seven-years-old, Hanabi was no longer the same girl she had been five years ago. That still didn't keep her from deliberately keeping childish traits that her father pretended to hate. "Missed
And just like that, Gaara started crying again—because Hanabi remembered.

Chapter End Notes

So deviantart user babavang made a thing, and the link to it is here: http://babavang.deviantart.com/art/Akimichi-Choko-525695969

Do take the time to check it out, for it is cute! ^^

Seeing as I'm updating, here's where I tell you I have my laptop back! It was just a battery issue, so yeah… Anyways, do you all remember what happened almost twenty chapters ago? Ahahaha, yeah—this is the result of that!

Things are different and yet, the same risks still exist. Whatever was helping Gaara sleep all those years ago is starting to wear off. With that, brings back his issues with Shukaku.

Orochimaru has effectively fucked up when he decided to pick Naruto over Sasuke, who would have been a less consequential choice (in the long-run), but alas, that was not to be. Now you have an Orochimaru with shaky plans for the Konoha Crush—oh, a bit of a heads up…Rasa was of a different mindset than he was in canon, so his death…a result of Orochimaru deciding to take matters into his hand since manipulation wasn't working.

And let me just say…Rasa and Gaara had been in the progress of mending their distant relationship. Make what you will of that. Oh, and a huge thank you to ChibiFoxAI—she's the reason Zabuza is locking Sai in a room with Naruto and has been a huge help when it comes to Bee and a lot of other things. I would be really lost without her. Oh, and Team Blast From The Past will end up being a thing, come these Chuunin exams, because Chōko doesn't know the difference between fanon and canon and she really doesn't want to risk it, anyways.

In case anyone is wondering about who the hell is Kiri, well he's a Kirigakure medic-nin who I decided to use as Team Ao's third Genin because I didn't want to make an OC and Utakata is anything but a Genin—he's a Chuunin, at least. But yeah, Kiri is an actual Naruto character—just look it up.

Also, if you thought Ninja-Vegas—I mean, Kirigakure was strange, then you definitely haven't seen what Kumogakure has up its sleeve. Let me just say…in contrast to Kiri, Kumo is the village with violent marriage/engagement customs. I'd go into Iwa, but there isn't much to say just yet…and Suna is something I'd rather keep under wraps for as long as I can.

Oh, and before I forget, you know how Kiba and Shino lost their first kiss together on a C-rank mission? That C-rank mission happened to be the one in one of those filler flashback episodes in Shippuden—the one where Sasuke and Naruto got stuck to each other. So filler does exist to some extent—it's just that different characters will be experiencing them all, so they aren't Team Kakashi exclusive, so do keep that in mind.
And Meganekko translates to glasses-wearing girl, which is the nickname Sai gave Chōko. Do keep in mind, that Meganekko has been used various times to describe Chōko—it's just that I use the term Meganekko in regards to Sai to show that it is indeed a nickname.

So as far as anyone can see, this is going to be one hell of a Chuunin exams! Hope everyone enjoyed this chapter, because things are just getting started! So until next time, everyone!
Seven days was all we had until the beginning of the first part of the Chuunin exams. We were going to spend these last few days doing whatever the hell we wanted and no one was going to stop us.

At least, that's how it came to be, what with Hanabi skipping classes the very next day, in order to stick around with us at Casa de Uzumaki. Let me tell you about how Kakashi reacted to the sudden influx of people in the house—it grated his nerves. First off, altogether, there were about twenty-one Genin under a single roof, an Academy student who gave no fucks about academic attendance, nine fox kits that liked to move around the house, and three Jounin.

That's twenty-five people, which soon turned to twenty-eight, because Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon had been learning for quite a while, from Hanabi, on how to sneak out of classes—a task that they finally succeeded in accomplishing after three months' worth of attempts. And not long after, Gai decided to investigate why his team wasn't showing up for training and twenty-eight became twenty-nine.

And twenty-nine plus nine plus one (Akamaru) equals thirty-nine, which is the amount of inhabitants in Casa de Uzumaki! So to clarify, within the span of forty-eight hours, Casa de Uzumaki went from housing five Genin, three Jounin, and nine fox kits, which would be seventeen, to suddenly, thirty-nine. Kakashi had been pretty tolerant so far…then Gai showed up and Gai plus a crowded house equals a disgruntled Kakashi who can't even.

Fortunately, for Kakashi's sanity, Iruka dropped by to pick up a certain quartet of absentees.

"I was hoping Hanabi-san would break out of this habit when all of you graduated…" Iruka sighed. "Now she's gone and included these three, over here…Naruto, I'm holding you accountable for this."

"What did I do, dattebayo?!" Naruto complained.

"It's because of you that Hanabi is like this!" Iruka looked so exasperated, and he had a point, but…

"Actually, if you have anyone to blame—it's Shisui." The beautiful bastard started Hanabi young and she picked up on it.

"Oh god…" Sasuke's eyes widened.

"What's wrong?" Ino was quick to ask.

Sasuke clutched his head in his hands as he looked at Hanabi, who stood at Iruka's side. "She's his legacy."

"I thought that was Naruto-kun?" Shino was perplexed.

"He still is—it's more that Naruto continued what Shisui started," Shikamaru explained.

"And through that extension, she is now Naruto's legacy!" Iruka certainly thought a lot about that, from the looks of his response. "And I would be quite fine with that idea—if only these three didn't become part of that as well!"
Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon all laughed nervously as Iruka looked sternly at them. Hanabi was completely unfazed, having grown used to Iruka over the years, thanks to us…

"We are *such* bad influences…” I couldn't help but smile when I said this.

"You most certainly are…” Despite what he had said, Iruka didn't seemed too annoyed.

*Only six more days until the Chuunin exams…*

Come the next day, there was a discernible lacking presence of everyone but Team Kakashi, Yamato, Ao, and Baki. While Kakashi tried to act as if he had nothing to do with it, Zabuza told all and explained that Kakashi had Kurenai, Asuma, and Gai keep their teams occupied with training and away from Casa de Uzumaki.

"There is only so much a man like Kakashi can take in a house like this," Zabuza remarked.

Yamato laughed nervously. "Poor Senpai…"

"You can meet with everyone else tomorrow—just give me enough time to prepare myself," Kakashi informed us as he tried to immerse himself in *Icha Icha Paradise.* "Though, please do try to leave the house if Gai decides to visit."

As Zabuza had said, there is only so much Kakashi can take. Speaking of Zabuza, he was deliberately pretending to be oblivious to Suigetsu, who was sneaking up on him in an attempt to steal his sword. Just when Suigetsu thought he had the Kubikiribōchō in his clutches, Zabuza moved his sword out of the way.

"You're gonna need to try harder than that, Hōzuki." Zabuza laughed.

"Grr…” Suigetsu growled.

Chōjūrō laughed nervously. "Suigetsu…please don't cause Zabuza trouble…”

"You're not even supposed to touch him now that he's a Konoha-nin," Kiri remarked.

"That's right—but I'll make an exception for the Hōzuki." Zabuza was like that.

"Though, I won't hesitate to freeze you if you harm Zabuza-sama." Haku smiled innocently as Suigetsu quickly cowered behind Chōjūrō.

"He seems quite taken with you," Temari mused, a playful smile having formed on her lips.

Chōjūrō smiled nervously. "It's more that he's using me as a shield…”

"Or since you're wielding his older brother's sword, he's going immediately toward you because of that connection," Sasuke suggested.

"He certainly seems safe around you." Sai smiled. It wasn't a genuine smile, but I could tell he was trying. He must have seen some part of himself in Suigetsu.

The two *did* also have older brothers who have died…wait, is Sai *empathizing*? Holy shit—this definitely deserves a sticker!

*Smack!*

"What did I do?” Sai seemed confused.
"Empathy—the feeling of relating to someone," I replied. "You had Shin, he had Mangetsu…the two of you are younger brothers to them."

Sai blinked a few times and nodded. "Ah! I see!"

_Danzō seriously needs to die…_

"So how exactly does this sticker thing work?" Kankurō finally decided to ask.

"Positive reinforcement." Good old psychology—it might have only been a ten-week college course, but I sure did remember a lot! "Every time Sai shows some emotion, he gets a sticker, which serves to reinforce this behavior. Basically, I'm teaching him that it is okay to show some emotion."

Or to sum it up, I'm conditioning Sai to stop acting like an emotionless tool.

…

"How the hell are you not a Yamanaka?" Kakashi had put _Icha Icha Paradise_ down after he had heard my explanation.

I shrugged.

_Only five more days until the Chuunin exams…_

The next day's bothersome hot weather brought our circle of friends to an agreement on visiting one of Konohagakure's lakes for a picnic. We were also going to swim—well, most of us were. Gaara, Kankurō, and Temari didn't exactly know how to swim, what with their Sunagakure lifestyle preventing them from ever having the chance. And yet, it was because of this lifestyle that made Ino insist on getting Gaara, Kankurō, Temari, and anyone else who didn't have a swimsuit get their own swimsuits.

So while Shikamaru, Chōji, Kiba, Shino, Sasuke, and Naruto went to go get a bunch of bento boxes from an Akimichi clan restaurant, the rest of us were busy with swimsuits. Swimsuits…swimsuits _everywhere_!

"Holy shit—you are pale!" I couldn't help but blurt out when Sai walked out of the changing room wearing only a pair of black board shorts.

Sai blinked a few times and looked at his skin. "I guess I am…"

Neji took one look at Sai and started making his way over to a nearby shelf full of sunblock. "We're going to need more of this."

"I wonder if Sasuke-kun'll let me put sunblock on his back for him…" Ino mused as she waited for Temari to leave the changing room.

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"I don't think he'll let anyone touch him…" Sakura remarked. "You remember how he was when we were teaching Hanabi-chan how to swim."

"Riiight…" Ino sighed in dismay. "Too bad…hey, Temari—you done yet?"

"Umm…is it supposed to be tight?" Temari asked as she peered out from behind the curtain. "Because it's really—holy crap, he's pale."

And for the second time, Sai looked at himself. "Hey, Meganekko…what do you call this feeling of discomfort?"
Oh my gosh, is Sai self-conscious? That's adorable! Though, should I really enforce this type of emotion?

…

*Smack!*

It's an emotion—why not? It's better to teach him what it is than leave him in the dark.

"It's called feeling self-conscious…" I explained. "We'll try to avoid making you feel that way, okay?"

"I see…" Sai smiled. "Thank you, Meganekko!"

…

"You know…I would like to punch the person who thought it would be okay to condition someone to be emotionless." That really pissed off Ino.

"Zabuza-sama said that as much as shinobi try to become killing machines, they are only human." And looks like Haku just—*whoa, niiice stomach.*

"For a second, I almost thought you were a flat-chested girl," Suigetsu remarked moments after exiting his changing room, now sporting a pair of purple board shorts. "Of course, even the flat one is flatter than you."

"You know, you're *really* starting to piss me off, Suigetsu…" You're this close to getting a fist to the face!

"Why do you insist on looking at that girl's chest?" Kiri arched his brow at Suigetsu.

"There is nothing wrong with a—" Thank you, Tenten, for shutting Lee up.

"I apologize for Suigetsu…" Chōjūrō exhaled shakily. "I think he just likes messing with you because of your reactions."

Is that so? "Well, if he keeps that shit up, he's gonna regret it."

At that moment, a shit-eating grin crossed Suigetsu's face. "What're you gonna do about it, short stuff?"

"Chōko-chan, no!" Hinata, yes!

*SPLASH!*

…

…

I was in a pretty bad mood by the time we made it to the lake, where a couple of Naruto's shadow clones should have set up our spot already. They did…but it wasn't just them—oh no.

The Kumo-nin were here.

*Oh shit.*
They were the same three we had seen the other day at the restaurant. And right now, the red-haired Kumo-nin, Karui, was currently obsessing over Naruto's fox kits, which he had brought along for the picnic. The blond-haired Kumo-nin, Atsui, seemed to have noticed our presence, while the white-haired Kumo-nin, Omoi, was staring specifically at a couple of our friends…that being Neji and Hinata.

"Man, I knew we shouldn't have come here…" Omoi frowned.

"It was hot—what else were we supposed to do, Omoi?" Atsui scratched the side of his head.

"Well, I'm not leaving." Karui seemed rather content to interact with one of Naruto's kits. "What's this little guy's name?"

"That's Tohru!" a Naruto clone said before holding up Kurama. "And this is Kurama—try to watch out for him. He likes to cause trouble."

Leave it to Naruto's clones to forget the tension between Kumogakure and the Hyuuga clan in order to make friends. Neji sure seemed annoyed and Hinata just seemed extremely uncomfortable.

Suigetsu, Kiri, and Chōjūrō were confused, as they weren't that well-informed about Konohagakure affairs—especially the one involving the Hyuuga clan and Kumo. Even Gaara, Kankurō, and Temari were still in the dark, considering that it was a private matter for both Hinata and Neji.

As for the rest of us, including the real Naruto, we were inwardly freaking out over how incredibly awkward this situation was. It was only until Chōji blurted out one of two words that I was known for saying and doing an action similar to what I usually did sometimes.

"Food?!" Chōji held out a bento box to Karui, who seemed to be the only one of her teammates not to be affected by the existing tension.

I noticed that Chōji was blushing, and that was probably because Karui was wearing a swimsuit, much like her teammates. It took me a couple of seconds to register that there was more to this than what I had originally assumed. And let me just say, it is friggin’ awkward to see your twin crushing on someone, like—Chōji, noooo!

I immediately assumed the worst when it came to Karui's reaction. Like—was she going to shoot him down harshly or something similar to that? Fortunately, that was not the case as Karui just blinked a few times and nodded her head.

"Sure, why not?" was her response to Chōji's outburst.

Once again, food saves the day…sort of.

…

The level of awkwardness managed to settle down a notch once we actually sat down to talk. For one thing, Atsui, Karui, and Omoi barely know what to even think of the Hyuuga affair. I mean, they were rather young when the incident had occurred and, unlike Hinata and Neji, they weren't directly affected by it.

"I know the past can't be changed, but…" Omoi seemed to be the most nervous out of his team.

"Mistakes have been made, but that shouldn't determine the way to act towards us." Karui had a point.

"So let's be friends?" Atsui tried to act cool, but he didn't seem to be doing too well under the serious
"C'mon Neji—they're guests in our village!" I know this was going to be difficult, but…lingering on the past was never good for anyone. "Just try to tolerate them, at least…?"

Neji stared at me for a good minute before sighing. "Very well…"

"U-Um…I'm H-Hyuuga Hinata!" Hinata was quick to introduce herself to Atsui, Karui, and Omoi after that. "It's nice to meet you!"

And it was Hinata's introduction that broke the ice. Neji might have still been distant to the three, but he was at least able to talk to them. It wasn't much, but again, it was a start.

"This shouldn't be too hard—right?" Temari looked nervously at Shikamaru as he used his Kagemane to slowly walk her into the shallow lake water.

"Just stay calm—the first step is to let go of your fear!" Ino was trying to calmly walk Temari through her very first swim lesson.

"Aaaah!" Temari shrieked when her left foot entered the water.

Did you know that Temari was aquaphobic? Well, now you do and that was the very reason the poor girl was freaking out, despite being in shallow water with Shikamaru.

"H-Hey—stop struggling." Shikamaru was having a hard time keeping control on Temari, who was most definitely on the verge of tears.

"I don't think I can do this!" It was strange—seeing Temari, of all people, in such a vulnerable state.

"So long as you're under my control, I won't let anything happen to you." Shikamaru tried to be as reassuring as ever. "Now just listen to Ino—she knows what to do."

"Breathe in…and then out." Ino was good at calming people down.

It took a while, but Temari eventually relaxed—and just in time, because Shikamaru had to release his hold on her, in order to avoid exhausting himself. While that went on between Temari, Shikamaru, and Ino, the rest of us were doing our own little thing. Naruto had made a bunch of shadow clones to help Gaara and Kankurō learn how to swim. Unlike their older sister, Gaara and Kankurō were much calmer when it came to the water.

Chōjūrō and Kiri were doing their best to keep Suigetsu from being a dick to Temari. Chōji was doing a rather good job at being subtle around Karui, who was still rather invested in the fox kits. Hinata was trying to take the time to familiarize herself with Omoi and Atsui, while Neji was currently caught up with Lee trying to push him and Sasuke into a competition to see who could swim the fastest.

Tenten stood at the sidelines with Shino, just sighing and shaking her head. Kiba kept egging Neji and Sasuke to go along with what Lee was proposing, with Akamaru barking along for an extra measure. Sai and Sakura were in the water with Haku and I. Haku had summoned Haruka in order to show off a bit and because I might have asked him to—I like Haruka, okay?! The bubbles, man, just…the bubbles! Plus—Haku had never showed his teammates his summons, so I decided now
was a good time as any to get Haku to bring out Haruka.

Of course, Haruka was anything but a sea horse when Haku had summoned him—by the by, did you know Haruka was male? I certainly did not, and the only reason I found out was because Haruka was not the tiny sea horse I had expected to see when the smoke had finally cleared. Instead, what we got was a rather attractive blue-eyed, raven-haired merman. Like, what the fuck?!

_Humana humana humana humana humana humana humana humana_

If there's anything about my reaction, it was that I wasn't the only one staring wide-eyed at the bishounen merman that Haku had finished summoning. No—we _all_ were, because hot _damn_, look at those muscles!

_Stupid sexy Haruka_

"H-Haruka?!" Haku was absolutely shocked. "Wh-What happened?"

Meanwhile with Haruka, the attractive little _shit_, he looked at himself. He then scratched the back of his head and said (he can _speak_), "Growth spurt."

Turns out, Haku's sea dragons are capable of taking the form of humans—or at least a form similar to that of Haruka's. As sea horses are technically considered the children of sea dragons, when it pertains to Haku's summons, when a sea horse begins to start growing into the next stage of its life, you basically get what Haruka is. He'll eventually revert back to a form more appropriate for a sea dragon. Until then, Haruka is stuck looking like a bishounen merman.

I have no idea what to even think of this. All I know is that, by the end of this day, Atsui, Karui, and Omoi joined our little circle of friends.

_Only four more days until the Chuunin exams..._

The next day, we ended up spending yet another day at the lake, as swimming lessons continued for Temari, Kankurō, and Gaara, while the rest of us tried to cope with the bothersome hot weather. Summer was definitely here. The days were much longer, now, and the sun was anything _but_ merciful.

I could already see my skin beginning to darken after yesterday's outing and, with consistent sun exposure plus swimming, I was going to darken immensely. Not that I mind, or anything—I mean, it's _definitely_ better than getting sunburned. I just seriously don't like staying out in the sun—it's fucking hot, okay?!

"So you're telling me your clan owns the restaurants that make this delicious food?!" Karui seems completely obsessed with Akimichi clan food. "That is awesome!"

Chōji seemed rather flattered, as was I, but I could tell that Karui's words affected him more than it did me. I think it's cute Chōji has a crush, but really—how the crap did _that_ even happen? Ehh, then again, Karui does look nice in that white, pink-polka-dotted one piece she's wearing. And she's not that bad of a person, if impulsive and irritable at times…but not everyone is perfect. In any case, she's treating my brother with respect, so I'm staying out of this.

"Hey, we got a stalker!" Suigetsu suddenly yelled, pointing out a nearly hidden girl who had been hiding behind a tree.

The girl peered out from behind the tree, looking rather mad as she yelled, "I am not a stalker!"
I had the biggest shock in my life when I noticed the girl's red hair and glasses. Holy fuck, it's Karin!

"What the hell?!"

"Then explain why you were watching us for the past hour?" Suigetsu seemed intent on proving that he was right about Karin stalking us.

Karin scowled as she adjusted her glasses. "Idiot—why would I stare at you for an hour?"

"Maybe you saw something you liked?" Suigetsu grinned. He was trying to provoke Karin and Chōjūrō caught on quickly by trying to change the subject.

"S-So who are you?" Chōjūrō asked.

Karin stared at Chōjūrō questioningly, briefly glancing at the rest of us as if we were going to do something. Slowly, she walked out from behind the tree. She was only wearing a lavender-colored one piece and as very obviously unarmed, but she pretended as though she was. "Karin from Kusagakure—if you do anything funny, I won't hesitate to attack."

"Why would we do anything, dattebayo?" Naruto frowned. "Hey, why were you watching us? Do you want to eat-ttebayo? Is that it?"

Karin said nothing and just stared at Naruto. She seemed less tense just looking at him though, but she still kept her guard up.

"There's a lot of food!" Naruto held up a bento box. "Hey, Chōko-chan, can she eat with us-ttebayo?"

"It's up to her." Frankly, I'm still trying to get over the shock that Karin is right there. "But if she wants to, she can."

Silence…

"Fine, I'll eat your food—but this doesn't mean anything!" A light blush tinged Karin's cheeks.

And that is how this circle of friends gained a stalker of some sort—we introduced ourselves to her, but Karin like to keep her distance and preferred to watch us than interact. The reason she had been hiding behind the tree was because she had been at the lake first before any of us. She hid when she sensed us coming—by the by, Karin was a sensor type. She was capable of detecting the presence of other people by directly sensing their chakra—which was how she detected us and considering our large number, Karin had every right to hide.

We might have unintentionally intimidated her with our arrival. Karin was on her own, since she had wanted to be on her own, away from her teammates, in a village that was not hers. Though, she seemed rather relaxed around Naruto for reasons that I couldn't exactly understand…and, in contrast, extremely uneasy around Gaara.

I barely know much about Karin, except her obsession with Sasuke (which is absent, fortunately), affiliation with Team Hebi, her healing abilities, I am aware that she is an Uzumaki, and something about perfume…

Oh, and her extremely volatile relationship with Suigetsu, which still seems to be a thing, based on how much Suigetsu keeps trying to provoke her. At least Suigetsu has stopped bugging me, for the time being, but I don't think Karin appreciates the attention.
Nope, she most definitely does not.

Only three more days until the Chuunin exams...

As of today, Neji was now fourteen!

Happy birthday, Neji!

We went to an Akimichi clan restaurant to celebrate—all twenty-five of us, plus ten (the fox kits and Akamaru). Our group was getting bigger with each passing day. It was almost ridiculous...but we were having a great time getting along—to a point, though. Karin and Suigetsu got along like water and oil. And Neji was still distant toward the Kumo-nin—just not as much as he had been previously. A lot of work needs to be done, though I don't think too much can be done about Karin and Suigetsu, since the little shit likes messing with the Uzumaki (is Karin even aware she is an Uzumaki?).

That aside, I decided now was a good time as any to give Neji an item I have been holding onto since Wave Country... "Happy birthday, Neji!"

Neji stared at the scroll I held out to him. "What is this...?"

"It's a summoning contract!" I chirped. "They're bats!"

"Bats..." Neji repeated.

I frowned. "Unless you want the crabs, then I can get them for you...?"

Neji shook his head and took the scroll. "I'm fine with anything you give me."

At that moment, three Iwa-nin approached the table we were all sitting at. I have no idea how long they had been inside this restaurant, but their appearance nearly scared the crap out of me. It didn't help that they were all older than we were—well, most of us (Kiri is still the oldest in our group). The spiky, brown-haired Iwa-nin seemed to be around Kiri's age. As for the extremely large (in height and build) Iwa-nin, his age was a little ambiguous, but the youthful look on his face made him appear at least younger than twenty. The raven-haired, pink-eyed Iwa-nin seemed to be the youngest out of her team, as well as the shortest. She was also the first out of her teammates to speak with us.

"Well, well—isn't this the cutest proposal I have ever seen!" Iwa-nin say what?!

"Excuse me?" Neji was baffled.

The pink-eyed kunoichi blinked a few times, seeming somewhat perplexed. "Don't you know? A gift like that given on a specific day is considered a proposal and since you've accepted it, that act binds you together in marriage."

Oh fucking hell—not again!

"Kurotsuchi—I don't think Konohagakure follows that custom," Kurotsuchi's large teammate remarked.

Kurotsuchi...where have I heard that name before—fucking hell, she's the Tsuchikage's granddaughter!

"Hey, I know that name-ttebayo!" Naruto seemed rather proud of that fact. "Your grandfather's the
Tsuchikage, huh? Huh?"

"Oh, so you've met the old man?" Kurotsuchi grinned. "How was he?"

"Look—can someone just fill me in what happened just now?" I mean, don't leave me hanging—what the heck was the whole proposal thing about? Don't leave me in the dark!

…

Apparently, in Iwagakure, handing people scrolls that contain jutsu or summoning contracts on a specific date—such as a birthday—as a gift is considered a marriage proposal, which, if accepted, legally binds the gift giver and receiver. There is just something so…specific about this custom. Like, what the heck—you seriously have to be careful with stuff like this!

I'm really glad that we cleared things up and, while we were at it, got some introductions out of the way. Introducing Team Kitsuchi's Kurotsuchi, Akatsuchi, and Ittan, the Genin team representing Iwagakure—they were here to stay for the Chuunin exams and, considering the current trend that seems to keep occurring, they might as well be part of this circle of friends.

I'm still extremely concerned about any of them finding out anything familiar about Naruto. The only reason things haven't been as awkward, was because Team Kakashi was in their Team Blast From The Past attire. Despite this, we got along well with Team Kitsuchi.

And so our group just getting bigger and bigger—Kakashi was certainly not going to be happy if we ever decided to go to Casa de Uzumaki, so we refrained from doing so. Kakashi needed a break and rather than staying cooped up inside a house, I think it was better for all of us to stay out and about in Konoha.

It sure did give us some interesting sights, such as seeing the Raikage chase after Bee and Yugito—why were they even running?

Only two more days until the Chuunin exams…

I might have been harping a bit on the other hidden villages' customs (and if I was, it was completely unintentional), but I would like to point out that Konohagakure isn't exactly as normal as it appears. There is much more to us than one would see at first glance. To begin with, I shall bring up a rather iconic landmark of this village. It was one that signified the founding of this hidden village.

Deep within the forests surrounding Konoha, there is a giant tree that stands out from the others. It is a tree unlike any other, for it is hollow and yet, despite being hollow, it still "lives" off the chakra of many plants and vegetation surrounding it. It is extremely large and wide, with a babbling brook running past the side of the base.

The story goes that the Shodai Hokage, Senju Hashirama, grew the tree that once stood previously before tree that now stands there in that place. He sculpted it as he grew it, turning it into a magnificent tree known as the First Tree. Alas—the tree met its end when Uchiha Madara destroyed the tree.

Fortunately, one of Hashirama's children managed to regrow it, using Hashirama's notes regarding the tree as a reference. And from the tree that was regrown, came an even grander tree. It is the tree that now stands much taller than its predecessor did—a tree that contains quite a lot of history. It is a tree that is considered quite sacred in this entire village—the Tree of Harmony.

There is really something special about a tree like this. Words can't really be used to describe the feeling one gets by looking at it. For any foreigners visiting Konoha, a visit to the Tree of Harmony
is a must…at least, that's what most tourists are told—whenever we get any, that is.

It was Naruto who ended up suggesting we all go to this location when we were out of ideas on where to go. None of us felt like swimming today, but it was still too hot for any of us to feel comfortable just hanging around Konoha. Nobody really protested, and considering we had many guests with us who had never been in Konoha before until now...this was a good time as any to introduce them to our customs.

"Hey, let's go! Hey, let's go!
I'm happy as can be,
Let's go walking, you and me,
Ready, set, come on, let's go!"

There was always something about visiting the Tree of Harmony that made most of us feel a sense of ease and happiness. I was in such a good mood that I was actually singing as we made our way to the Tree of Harmony, with Naruto leading the way.

It has been quite a while since we last visited the tree. The last time we did, was when Shisui was still alive. The thing about the Tree of Harmony is that one doesn't just visit the tree. It's an experience—one that can't really be explained.

"The foxes and the badgers too,
All come out to play.
They all want to explore,
The deep and wonderful woods all day!"

What's funny is that the fox kits were with us. Kurama was still being a little troublemaker, Yuu seemed to be the designated leader of the pack or whatever appropriate term was used to describe a group of foxes, Ryuuichi seemed to be the one that stuck around closer to Naruto, as did Tohru and Kyo. Jotaro, Kakyoin, and Blue were practically everywhere, their sense of adventure high. As for Yosuke, Gaara took an interest in him and was currently carrying the marble fox.

"Look at all my many friends,
Ready, set, let's go!"

Sometimes, songs can be extremely fitting, depending on the situation. For this one, this song is just that and I am amazed at how Suigetsu was able to stop being a little shit for once. I was expecting him to start picking on me once I had stopped singing. Instead, there was nothing but silence…the only sound being that of the many chirping birds and singing of cicadas. Oh man, near the end of summer, the cicadas are going to get on everyone's nerves.

Anyways, the reason why Suigetsu had never said anything was because we finally arrived at our destination. And the one thing that usually happens to newcomers is this awestruck expression and silence that follows after. That was what happened to our friends from Iwa, Kiri, Kumo, Kusa, and Suna.

"Behold, the Tree of Harmony!" Naruto was quick to introduce the massive tree before us. It was just as magnificent as ever. "On the outside, you can see the many carvings of animals, of which are
According to the information Naruto had learned, the carvings were originally supposed to have a different role, such as being containers of the summoning contract scrolls that matched its respective carving. One had to break through the carving to get to the scroll, but it was a design that was never acted upon and the carvings were just left alone. The carvings becoming something more akin to showing a summon their ancestral roots in a way. As mentioned before, this tree contains quite a lot of history.

In fact, there is much more to it on the inside, than the outside. Naruto led us around the base of the tree, looking through the many gaps of the giant roots before stopping across a certain gap. He grinned widely and gestured at us before jumping into the gap. Jumping into the gap landed us in a slide-like slope that took us into many directions, from down to up, left to right, and any combinations of the aforementioned directions. It was quite fun and best of all—no splinters!

Eventually, all of us landed in a patch of soft grass, so our landing wasn't that rough. There was a couple moments of silence before Kiba loudly exclaimed, saying that the slide was one of his favorite parts about the tree.

"It's been too long, aahahaha!" Kiba laughed. "You've never been here before, huh, Akamaru?"

"Bark!"

"Whoa!" seemed to be our guests' responses as they looked around the inside of the tree.

Being as gigantic and wide as it was, the tree was able to contain so much more inside of it than one would ever imagine. There was a vibrant green grass floor with a river flowing through it. Sunlight streamed through the leafy ceiling of sorts above us. The temperature was moderately cool, unlike the temperature outside of the tree. It was nice...

There were also quite a lot of flowers growing all around the area, but what made them so special is that these were the types of flowers that have not been seen around since Hashirama was the Hokage. For Shino, he considered this one of his favorite aspects of the Tree of Harmony, which he shared with Ino and Sakura.

If you sat around and stayed quiet, you could listen to the echoing of chirping birds, the flowing water of the river, and—if you listened really closely—you could hear a heartbeat. The tree is alive and there is just something so special about this tree that one really couldn't explain.

"It's like an emotion that is tangible," Naruto remarked. "You can feel it...at least, that's what I think, dattebayo. Before I met any of you guys, I used to come here all the time when I was little, to escape the villagers' glares and stuff. I felt at peace here."

What Naruto had said probably explained the tree as best as anyone could. Also, my feels...stop!

"I thought this could be a cool secret training ground, but I could never bring myself to practice here-ttebayo." Naruto grinned as he scratched the back of his head.

"...Sai, are you crying?" Sasuke suddenly said.

Immediately, all attention was on Sai, who wore a blank expression on his face as tears streamed down his cheeks. He seemed so surprised, that he hesitated to touch the wet trails of tears on his face. Has it really been that long since he last cried?

"It feels...as though something is squeezing me inside," was all Sai could really say. "It hurts..."
My chest practically tightened when I heard Sai say that. I walked over to him and, instead of giving him a sticker, I hugged him. "You're sad…"

"Why?" That was a question that I would think that some people would ask, in regards to crying.

"Sometimes...there are just things you really can't explain." I smiled wryly as I gently placed a sticker on Sai's hitai-ate. "Because you can feel sad for various reasons...when something bad happens, something feels bittersweet, or when someone leaves—really, it depends on the person."

"I miss Shin..." Sai sniffed.

And for the first time, in the entire month and some days that we had known Sai, he started sobbing. Our reaction to this, as many of the others new to our group would learn, was to initiate a group hug. Up until this day, Sai was clueless about showing emotion. Now, I think he gained a decent grasp on what they were. It will still take him some time, but I'd say that this experience, overall, is a great step forward toward undoing Danzō's conditioning.

_You better watch your back, you Sharingan-stealing bastard..._

Since Sai had never felt such a rush of emotions before, it wasn't too much of a surprise that the sensation left him feeling so overwhelmed. We had to leave early because of poor Sai. Ino had never been so pissed in her life to see someone react the way he did.

"I seriously want to punch the person who did this to Sai..." Ino held up her tightened fist as she watched Haku and Sakura console Sai, who seemed rather exhausted.

"Naruto, we gotta go!" Sasuke called out to Naruto, who was currently somewhere within the depths of this tree.

"I'll be back in a sec, dattebayo!" Naruto yelled back.

_Only one more day until the Chuunin exams..._

Today was our last day, because tomorrow was the day the Chuunin exams began. We were back at the Tree of Harmony, with extra guests that were the jinchuuriki of Iwa, Kiri, and Kumo. Naruto had made it his goal to bring them along, since he felt like showing the friends he had made during the dinner such a beautiful place.

"This is beautiful..." Yugito was awestruck.

For once, Bee was having trouble rhyming and just stayed silent as he marveled his surroundings. Han seemed rather intrigued with the tiny birds that had perched themselves on top of his hat. Utakata started laughing when a couple of butterflies had landed in Yagura's hair. And Rōshi just seemed close to tears—all of them seemed close to tears, actually. Even Naruto and Gaara, for reasons that none of them could even explain.

It got even more confusing once we arrive to the carvings inside the tree. While the outside carvings were that of first generation Boss summons, the inside carvings were of the bijuu. The thing about the tree that is quite tragic was that it was meant to signify the unity that followed after the Warring States Period. The Five Great Shinobi Countries used to get along...

Then the First Shinobi World War happened.

Of course, now...it's complicated. The Five Great Shinobi Countries are together again, but just for the Chuunin exams. Still—it's not something that should be overlooked.
And right now, all of the jinchuuriki are going to what I believe were their respective bijuu's carvings. It was as though something was drawing them to the carvings. Gaara had walked up to the carving that I had long associated as Shukaku's carving, which was of a one-tailed tanuki. Yugito lightly trailed her fingers across the carving of the two-tailed bakaneko. Yagura's gaze was fixated on the carving of the three-tailed turtle. Rōshi had his hand held over the carving of the four-tailed monkey. Han just stared at the carving of the Gobi, of which I always thought looked like a combination of a horse and a dolphin—it's strange.

The only reason I knew that the Rokubi was a slug was because I had asked Utakata in private as to what his bijuu a few days ago, during that dinner with the Sandaime and the others. He had seemed so amused that I had asked him and now, as he looked at the carving of the six-tailed slug, his expression was that of astonishment.

The Nanabi was the only carving that was left alone and years ago, Shino had correctly identified it as a kabutomushi—or a horned beetle. I could only assume that our missing jinchuuriki from Takigakure was the container of the Nanabi at this point. I wonder if we'll ever get to see them…

And if there's one thing I know about Gyūki—apart from being Bee's bijuu—it was that they were like this cross between an ox and an octopus. The things I managed to remember from my past life…

I really wished I had more information than I do now. Though, in a way, I think it is somewhat best to be ignorant. Not always—just sometimes. Still…the information I have now is somewhat useful. It's enough for me to know why Bee is so drawn to the carving of the Hachibi.

And Naruto, as always, was drawn to Kurama's carving. It was something that Shisui had commented on, and, being who we were years ago, we never thought too much about it, but now…something was up. Even his fox kits were gathering around the carving.

All at once, the jinchuuriki began crying…and we had no idea why. They just did. Gaara tried his best to wipe away the tears, but they just kept coming. Yugito was quite shocked that she was even crying, though she did seemed drawn to Yagura, who was bawling his eyes out like a child. For once, he didn't seem too against the idea of being treated like a child when Yugito patted him on the shoulder. In fact, he just latched his arms around her waist in an embrace as he cried.

One thing about Rōshi that I never really mentioned was that, for an adult his age, he was rather short. Not as short as Yagura, but he was still around our height (and taller than me). He seemed so much smaller and shorter than he was, just standing next to Han. Of course, everyone looked smaller around Han. And yet, as the two of them cried, Rōshi and Han both looked so small, their distinct height differences not really doing much in their current state.

Utakata tried to distract himself with his bubbles, but the tears kept coming. Bee had to look away in order to take off his sunglasses and wipe away the tears without any of us getting a chance to catch a glimpse of his eyes.

And Naruto…Naruto looked at his kits, then at the jinchuuriki near him, and, finally, at me. He sniffed, using the back of his sleeve to wipe away the tears that kept coming. "Ch-Chōko-chan…?"

"Why are you crying?" I finally asked the question that all of us were wanting to ask.

"I don't know, dattebayo." Naruto sniffed as he wiped his eyes again. "It's like…it's like when you named Kurama. Only, instead of feeling mad…I feel sad. I just don't know why..."

It was an answer that Gaara, Yugito, Yagura, Rōshi, Han, Utakata, and Bee could agree on—they just felt so sad, but didn't know why.
"Maybe we should go somewhere else, away from these carvings." Shikamaru seemed onto something, but there was something else about the look in his eye as he looked at Naruto and the others who were like him. I wonder if he's figured it out…

…

By the time we reached the center of the tree, those who had been crying finally stopped. The jinchuuriki with us seemed much calmer, if content. Bee was back to his usual rapping habits, making it his goal to show his appreciation for the tree through his rapping. Yagura seemed a bit embarrassed as he talked to Yugito, apologizing for his behavior, but she brushed it off, saying it was fine.

Gaara had distanced himself away from the others and found solace in his siblings, who were asking him if everything was fine. As much as Gaara said he was fine, he looked anything but fine. Birds continued to perch themselves on Han's hat, with Rōshi making a comment about it, only stopping when a bird landed right on top of his head. Han laughed at this.

Utakata continued to blow bubbles, saying that he liked the way they appeared inside this tree. The lighting from the sun streaming through the leafy ceiling above us gave the bubbles a rather pretty sheen. Of course, the bubbles also acted as a bit of a toy for the kits, who chased after them as they drifted lower and lower to the ground. I noticed Utakata smiling at the sight when he thought no one was looking, so there was that.

And Naruto was so hyped up to tell everyone about the graves that were inside this tree—by the way, did you know that the Tree of Harmony also acted as a makeshift tomb of sorts for our Hokage? Well, now you know and let me just say, it's something that's happened recently. Like say—right after the Yondaime had died. The Sandaime decided to relocate the graves of the deceased Hokage to the Tree of Harmony. And alongside the Hokage's graves were trees that were very much like Shisui's tree.

The thing about Ino's family's side business was that it's actually part of an old custom the Senju clan had, in regards to what they did with their dead. Considering what used to be of the world during the Warring States Period, the trees were meant to honor the dead of many of the Senju clan's kin. So many trees…so many deaths…it was sobering.

And yet, it was a custom that seemed to have been extended to anyone who had become Hokage. In death, their ashes would be mixed with the soil of a tree that would grow in place of their grave. So far, there are only three graves, of which have been relocated to this tree. It was a decision Hiruzen had made after the Yondaime had met his death.

Senju Hashirama's tree was a plum blossom tree that was flowering rather beautifully. Senju Tobirama had a walnut tree, and Namikaze Minato had a beech tree. Nearby the trees were uncolored statues of the Hokage. I was a little worried about our Iwa-nin companions recognizing Minato's statue, but all they really did was stare at the trees.

"So the Nidaime has a walnut tree for his marker?" Kurotsuchi asked as she looked over the tall tree.

"Well…" Naruto grinned widely as he scratched the back of his head. "From what I've heard about him from Jiji, Tobirama-san was a bit of an insensitive walnut…so it does fit."

At that moment, Sai burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. It was so sudden and just, so jarring—this was the first time we have ever heard Sai laugh like that. It was so genuine…

*Smack!*
Sai wasn't able to say anything for a bit, as he was still laughing, but I could tell he wanted to thank me for the sticker. He's really come a long way since he showed up at our door…

"So far, the Raikage's hat has been passed down from father to son since they keep going crazy," Yugito suddenly began. "If one of us was caught even insulting Ay-sama's line like that, we would get a strict scolding at the least."

Naruto looked strangely at Yugito. "Is there just a giant sign that says, 'No Fun', in your village?"

"No fun, more like can't run," Bee remarked.

"Speaking of run, why exactly was the Raikage chasing after you two a couple of days back?" Sasuke asked.

Yugito laughed awkwardly. "We might have snuck out while Ay-sama was taking a nap…"

"To do what?" I was honestly curious.

"Little lady was getting bored, so I suggested we get a reward," Bee explained.

"Freedom, with a side order of karaoke." Yugito stuck her tongue out a bit. "Bee wasn't supposed to have left the room, though…"

"It's all right—and I think we're rather tight." Bee grinned as he held out his fist to Yugito.

Yugito grinned back at Bee and bumped his fist with hers. "Likewise."

It's nice to see these two Jinchuuriki getting along so nicely… The same could be said about Utakata and Yagura, who are acting like a pair of brothers. Ironically, Utakata appears more like the older brother, while Yagura is the younger brother…

_Yagura must never know of this thought…_

"You know, you look a lot like the Yondaime Hokage," Karui suddenly said as she looked over the statue of Namikaze Minato.

Karui's comment nearly made my heart stop as I turned my attention to our Iwa companions. Kurotsuchi, Akatsuchi, and Ittan seemed to be considering Karui's comment as they looked at the statue and then at Naruto. A minute passed, with no one saying anything.

Then Kurotsuchi spoke. "I see some resemblance…but I doubt this kid has what it takes to be the Yellow Flash."

"Not now, at least," Akatsuchi remarked.

"Definitely has a long ways to go…” Ittan added.

"Hey!" Naruto snapped.

Kurotsuchi laughed. "If you don't agree with what we say, then you best prove us wrong in the Chuunin exams. That goes for all of you, okay?"

"We'll be watching all of you from the sidelines." Rōshi grinned.

"So do try to give us a good show." Utakata smirked.
"And don't die…please." Yagura almost sounded as though he was pleading.

His comment really woke us up. We could die in the Chuunin exams if we weren't too careful. And yet—I don't feel scared…why is that? Maybe it's a delayed reaction, but for now, I'm just going to enjoy the moment while I'm in it—that's how it's been for me since I was born into this world. It's still not the smartest thing I have ever done, but it's better than stressing over the events I'm not even too sure will happen or not.

You gotta love deviations, ahahaha….

…

…

We stayed inside the Tree of Harmony far longer than any of us had intended. And for that, we were granted a magnificent sight once the sun had completely set and the sky had darkened. At night, from within the tree, it had a bioluminescent appearance. Really, the glowing color coming off from inside the tree was the chakra that was flowing through it.

When the First Tree was destroyed, the Tree of Harmony had been planted exactly in the location where the First Tree once stood. The reason why the Tree of Harmony grew so much more magnificently than its predecessor was that Hashirama's chakra, which had once flowed through the First Tree, still lingered in that location. It was why the Tree of Harmony flourished so much.

Even now, Hashirama's chakra still flows through this tree, as shown by the glow seen every night, within the tree. The color tends to change with each season, almost like a mood. It just comes to show how alive this tree really is.

Karin described the chakra flowing through the tree as unique. She seemed so dazzled by it, saying that it was comforting—even loving. There was just a flurry of emotions that she got from the tree—all positive.

To be honest, we were never supposed to bring any foreigners inside the tree and yet, look at us, with our party of intriguing characters. It's not so bad, breaking the rules…especially since it's been so beneficial to our bonding. Everyone has been getting along—and for our jinchuuriki guests, getting along with shinobi from their respective villages was a huge plus.

We might have all fallen asleep…well, everyone, except Gaara, who seemed to have been having a rather engaging conversation with Bee when I woke up from my nap. With most of us asleep, seeing Gaara putting his trust in Bee might have made him feel as though he was questioning our trust in him.

And yet, considering how scared Naruto had been when he confided in me about his secret…I don't blame Gaara. I don't blame him at all. For Gaara, Bee was his safest choice as an outlet—someone who wouldn't judge him because they were alike.

I'm not exactly sure what it was they were talking about, because Gaara soon noticed I had woken up, and right after, everyone else had started to wake up. He seemed nervous, but otherwise, somewhat relieved. It showed when Bee had patted Gaara on the head and his hand hadn't come in contact with sand.

Gaara trusted Bee and having someone who could support him was better than being on his own. It was Sasuke and Naruto all over again. The question is whether or not Bee knew everything about Gaara's concerns—about his problems concerning Shukaku, the fact that he has been keeping a huge
secret from us for nearly five years, or both. Whatever it was, at least Gaara wasn't alone in that aspect.

Eventually, Gaara will find the courage to confide in us, his friends…today is just not that day. For now, I think it was best to enjoy today for what it was—a day of bonding and possibly, discovery.

Come tomorrow, the Chuunin exams will begin...

Chapter End Notes

4-20-15 UPDATE: SO BABAVANG OF DEVIANTART DID ANOTHER THING AND JUST...YOU GUYS CAN FINALLY SEE TEAM BLAST FROM THE PAST! Check it out because holy crap, is it awesome! Just...I'm so speechless, I'm just so happy. T^T

Here be the link: http://babavang.deviantart.com/art/Akimichi-Choko-2-527577396

Just so you know, the Tree of Harmony came to be because everyone kept saying that Konoha was the most normal out of the hidden villages and you're kinda right…except they have this tree. So despite having rather normal marriage customs, Konoha is still a little nutty (please excuse the pun, if you will, ahaha).

So anyways, the Tree of Harmony came to be when ChibiFoxAI and I came across the Tree That Owns Itself, this tree that pretty much owns itself (look it up). Then she brought up the Tree of Life (look that up, for it is beautiful), and then we remembered Wind Waker. Really, this tree started off as a way to show that Konoha wasn't as normal as it had seemed, and pretty much, we got this beautiful tree that has Hashirama's chakra flowing through it. We pretty much have joint ownership of the idea, in case anyone is wondering…ahahaha, it's a wonderful idea—shush!

So yeah, Konoha kinda sorta worships tree, that soul tree Shisui has is actually part of a Senju clan custom, and if you remember what Naruto had been reading, he was actually reading about Senju clan customs. It is a thing—one that is slowly becoming more and more of a Konoha thing and not just a Senju clan exclusive.

Anyways, in case any of you guys were wondering as for all the crying in this chapter…the Tree of Harmony is a weird tree. It has Hashirama's chakra, but you gotta remember what kind of guy the Shodai Hokage is and I'm referring to the fact that he is an inheritor to Ōtsutsuki Asura's chakra, what with him being a reincarnation of the guy. Hey, look! I actually did the research this time around, with a little help from ChibiFoxAI (get used to seeing her name, she's here to stay)! ^^

Anyways, the reason for the crying is because the Jinchuuriki can recognize Asura's chakra flowing through the trees, since Hashirama was able to tap into it. The carvings, plus the chakra, as well as, if you consider how the Bijuu were created by the Sage of Six Paths, Asura's father, they're technically stepsiblings. If you take all of that onto consideration, it really touches on how highly the Bijuu had viewed Hagoromo in order to feel such a connection to Asura's chakra. Also, take into consideration of the words Karin had used to describe the chakra.

By the by, Karin is now part of this circle of friends, as are Kurotsuchi, Akatsuchi, Ittan,
Atsui, Karui, and Omoi. Really, this group is getting full of more and more characters, so please do excuse the lack of dialogue in some places. It's hard to work when you have like over twenty characters in one setting.

On a side note, you have managed to catch a glimpse of Iwagakure's marriage customs and when it comes to their customs, it's more about being specific and word for word… so, unless otherwise (such as in the case of Chōko and Neji), you would have to know what you're doing in order to get yourself engaged/married.

And Haku is in possession of sea dragons who are capable of taking on a human form or, in the case of Haruka, the form of a bishounen merman… or mermaid (there are females as well). It is a form restricted only to them and it's basically their go-to form whenever they are going through growth spurts, so expect to see more pretty mermen… or mermaids. By the by, does anyone get the reference, because it's there!

Anyways, when it comes to certain emotions and Sai, he will get overwhelmed because of how unused to it he is with strong emotions. Also, Temari is aquaphobic—she's slowly getting over it. Chōko may or may not have qualities that would have made her an excellent Yamanaka (psychology is fun, yo) and likes to sing songs from My Neighbor Totoro (see Stroll for reference), and Kakashi has his limits when it comes to being in a crowded house with Gai.

So I hope you like this chapter and I promise you guys, the next chapter, it begins. Be it, it will be the first part of the Chuunin exams, but dang it, it's something! Plus, you will be hearing the laments of a second-year college student. Oh, what fun you guys shall have, hearing Chōko suffering through exams. In any case, I had fun writing this chapter!

So until next time, everyone!
When I woke up the next morning, I was extremely sluggish. I didn't want to get out of bed—like, at all. I just wanted to stay here, where it's nice and comfy and safe—but I can...because today, the first part of the Chuunin exams was going to begin at 4 PM and, unless we wanted to get disqualified, Team Kakashi needed to get their asses to Room 301.

Sigh...

I grabbed my glasses off the counter and rolled out of bed...quite literally, actually. To the point I landed onto the floor quite noisily.

Thud!

"Ugh..." Okay, now I'm awake. I wonder if anyone else heard me fall—

Knock! Knock!

"You okay in there, Chōko?" Ah, it seems Kakashi heard me.

"I'm fine...just fell off the bed." I yawned as I put my glasses on. "I'll be out in a bit to wake the others up, if they haven't already."

"I was about to wake them up, but I guess I'll let you do that." Good ol' Kakashi...

Welp, time to change into Nohara Rin's clothes again. Team Blast From The Past is definitely staying for the first part of the Chuunin exams. And while Team Kitsuchi from Iwagakure seems to be indifferent to Naruto, despite Karui having pointed out the similarities between Naruto and Namikaze Minato (thank you Tree of Harmony statue), there is still the fact that there are Iwagakure Chuunin in this village and a couple of Jounin. It'd be a cold day in hell before the other villages would just walk into Konoha with only their jinchuuriki, three Genin, and a Jounin—because that is just seriously asking for others to take advantage of the situation. So the Kage had also brought in some of their Chuunin and Jounin for the occasion...for safety reasons.

Once again, it feels as though Orochimaru is screwed, but at the same time, I'm concerned about how the Chuunin and Jounin that the Kage had brought with them feel about the Chuunin exams and being in Konohagakure with the other hidden villages. While the Kage, their Genin teams, and jinchuuriki have been getting along with the rest of us, there's not much to say about the other shinobi they have brought with them. At least—that's what our friends from Iwagakure, Kumogakure, and Kirigakure had told us.

Internal conflict is so troublesome...

It is still a concern, but not too much...I hope. Okay, might as well stop thinking about things and get dressed! It's going to be a long day today...
About less than fifteen minutes later, I walked out of my room, wearing Rin's clothes and currently tying my green ribbon into my hair. I kept the same style Haku had tied my ribbon on the day we had exchanged ribbons, though I do like to switch up the side on which I tied the ribbon. Today, I was feeling like keeping the tie to the right side of my head.

My hitai-ate was on my forehead for once…well, it's been like that every time I wore Rin's clothes. I thought it would only be fitting if I wore my hitai-ate the same way she had worn hers… It took a while to get used to, what with my glasses, but I still do prefer wearing my hitai-ate around my neck. It's just…I really hate having my neck exposed.

I stretched my arms out afterwards before making my way over to Naruto and Sasuke's rooms…but not before stumbling over a lone sandal—is that Naruto's?! Oh my god, he's going to get it! I picked up the sandal off the floor and walked all the way to Naruto's door, with the intent on opening his door and throwing the sandal right at his head… I'm not a morning person. Nope—I am most definitely not.

So I opened Naruto's door, as quietly as possible, sandal held up high in the air, ready to be thrown with my right hand…then I saw the blond-haired knucklehead snuggling up with his nine fox kits in his bed. It was such a cute scene…I immediately discarded any thoughts of throwing the sandal at Naruto. I mean, even if I still did wanted to go through with it, I'd rather not let the kits get involved. There goes that amusing rude awakening…

Oh god dammit, Zabuza's rubbing off on me. "Ugh…"

"Are you gonna throw that sandal or not?" Speak of the devil!

"Aah!" I shrieked and turned around, sandal gripped tightly in my right hand as I tried to use it to hit Zabuza in the chest, only for the former Kiri-nin to grab my hand before the sandal made any contact with his body. God damn, his reflexes!

"Need to be a little faster than that." Zabuza chuckled as he took the sandal from my hand.

"Don't fucking sneak up on me!" Oh my god, my heart!

"What's going on-ttebayo?" Looks like Naruto woke up to the sweet sounds of my screams…honestly, I'm surprised he woke up as calmly as he did, because my shrieks are anything but pleasant.

Considering how Sasuke opened the door to his room in order to peer out and see what was happening on the second floor with a look of irritation on his face…he definitely didn't appreciate waking up to the sound of Zabuza scaring the crap out of me. Since Haku, Sai, and Yamato hadn't come out of their rooms, I could only assume that they were already awake and downstairs.

"The hell, man…?" Sasuke rubbed at his eye, yawning afterwards.

"Blame this asshole right here!" I jabbed my elbow into Zabuza's side, which didn't really hurt him, though it did amuse him.

"I just wanted to see the looks of anxiety on the rookies' faces." Zabuza chuckled. "You three are oddly calm for a bunch of rookie Genin taking the Chuunin exams."

"Sai and Haku are also rookies—why aren't you bothering them?" Sasuke was quick to point out.
"May I remind you that Sai still has issues with his emotions and how much more tense it had been for Haku, prior to our meeting in Wave?" Zabuza also had a good point…

And considering that Sai was part of ROOT…anxiety is the last emotion Danzo would want any of his operatives feeling.

**How much longer do we have to put up with this bastard's presence in Konoha?**

I really wish I was at least informed about the bastard's death, so I could have a timeline of sorts when it involved the future… Is it even healthy to wish someone dead? Well, there was Gatou, but meh…best not think about it.

"So Team Blast From The Past?" Sasuke questioned, as he looked me over.

"Yup." That's all I had to say.

Sasuke nodded his head and went back into his room, closing the door as he did. I turned my attention back on Naruto, who was half-asleep, with Kurama tugging at one of his blond spikes.

"Five more minutes, dattebayo." Naruto yawned, before his eyes snapped open wide when Jotaro suddenly pounced on his stomach. "Ack!"

"Get dressed, knucklehead," I told Naruto before closing his door. I turned around, not too surprised to see Zabuza was gone. The bastard liked to fuck with people's heads, and come and go whenever he pleased.

_Growl._

My left eye twitched slightly. I should probably go eat breakfast…stupid stomach.

...

I made omurice for breakfast, because it was the quickest thing to make with the ingredients that we had. We seriously need to stock up on food again…

"Don't look at me," Zabuza said as he ate his food. "I ain't getting shit."

As much as I want to call Zabuza out for not doing his share of grocery shopping, I think it's for the best he doesn't go. Most of the civilians of Konoha were still getting used to his presence and because gossip spread like wildfire, just about everyone is aware of Zabuza's former affiliation with Kirigakure and his former status as a missing-nin. If there was one thing Manabe Masamune was absolutely right about, it's how people will question your loyalty.

And just like Masamune, Zabuza may have to prove his loyalty eventually. Until then, Zabuza gave no fucks about the treatment he received. People were soon learning that it was a bad idea to piss off a former Kiri-nin, anyways. While Zabuza couldn't physically do anything—verbally was a completely different story and by god, Zabuza could mess with people just using words.

"I ain't a sadist for nothing," Zabuza remarked.

"Right you are, Zabuza-sama." Haku, please don't smile at something like that—it's creepy.

"Are you a sadist too, Yuki-onna?" Sai asked Haku.

Haku blinked and smiled. "Heehee…"
"Nah, he's too kind to be a sadist," Zabuza replied. "However, he does have a lot of potential…"

Did anyone else feel that sudden chill going down their spine? No? I guess it's just me…

"Can we please refrain from speaking about sadism at the table?" Yamato laughed nervously as a small bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

"Maa, Yamato has a point." I still cannot get over how Kakashi could eat his food without any of us seeing his face. He was already done with his breakfast.

And yet, there was Sasuke, with his mask pulled down because he had not yet mastered the way of Hatake Kakashi. It was cute how much he tried, but failed.

Meanwhile with Naruto, he was busy feeding his kits. By now, they had been completely weaned and were on a somewhat carnivorous diet, with a side dish of fruits. There will come a time that the kits will have to learn how to hunt on their own. When exactly that would be, I honestly don't know, but I think Naruto is having too much fun spoiling his kits. He at least got the dang kits toilet trained (or rather, litter box trained), that's for sure…

"So what time are we leaving?" I asked before shoving a spoonful of omurice into my mouth.

"I suggest you go early—you never know what could happen." It was almost as though Kakashi was trying to give us a hint, which was most likely the case.

"Yeah, Bushy Brows could challenge Sasuke-ttebayo." Wow, Naruto, way to be accurate—wait, would Lee actually challenge Sasuke? Would he really, after all this time we spent together during the past week?

…

I don't flipping know. "So who's gonna stay home to watch the kits?"

"Already got Iruka on it," Kakashi said as he stood up to take his empty plate to the sink. God, he is good at not showing his face! "Keep trying, Sasuke—you'll eventually get the hang of it."

"Hn…" Sasuke ignored Kakashi.

It's so weird how…normal this type of scene is. It's not bad—it's just a little mindboggling.

"Oi, Sai…" Kakashi suddenly called to Sai, who was almost done with his meal. "You mind doing me a little favor?"

"Now what would that be, Kakashi-sensei?" There's that fake smile again…Sai still needs more work, but he is getting better.

Anyways, around two in the afternoon, we later found out what favor it was that Kakashi had asked of Sai. He had asked the boy to take a group picture of Team Kakashi. Considering how many times Naruto, Sasuke, and I have worn these outfits, I was wondering when exactly Kakashi wanted to take a picture with us in this getup. I guess today was a good day as any…

"Get closer, Chōko, Naruto!" Kakashi chuckled as he placed his right hand on my right shoulder and his left hand on Naruto's left shoulder. The two of us were standing right in front of Kakashi, with Sasuke standing front of all of us, somewhere in the middle of Naruto and me.

I was usually the one standing in the middle, but not this time. It was a little off-putting, until I
noticed the alignment on Sasuke and Kakashi. Depending on how Sai took the picture, there was a good chance that it could come out symmetrically balanced—at least, in regards to Sasuke and Kakashi.

I'm not too sure, though, since I'm not that great with shots, in terms of photography. I only have minor experience and what minor experience I had was during the remaining months of my past life, during the autumn quarter of my sophomore college year. I wonder how popular photography is in this world…

"Three, two, one…smile!" It was kinda funny hearing Sai tell us to smile, when he couldn't really smile.

It was ironic enough to make me smile, though I had to keep myself from laughing when I noticed that Naruto had been holding up a V-sign just behind Sasuke's head, making the Uchiha appear as if he had bunny ears. It was a good thing I didn't notice that until after Sai had taken the picture, because I blinked.

"Pfft…heehee…" This is going to be a hilarious photo once it comes out!

"What the—Naruto, you idiot!" Oh, looks like Sasuke noticed.

"Ahahaha, took you long enough, dattebayo!" Naruto laughed.

And there goes Sasuke and Naruto getting into their usual scuffles. It was never anything too serious, but Kakashi liked to treat it as such whenever he broke the two up—for comedic measure. The two were really like brothers…

"Now, now—we should get going." Kakashi smiled as he carried both Naruto and Sasuke, the two in one arm each, at his sides. They were separated enough, but the distance wasn't too great—it was just the way they were being restrained that kept them from touching each other.

"We'll watch over the kits while you're gone," Yamato was quick to say as he pulled Kurama off his pant leg. "We are waiting for Sakura, anyways."

"Don't be late!" I told Yamato, Haku, and Sai before follow Kakashi out the door as he carried Naruto and Sasuke under his arms.

This was seriously going to be a long day…

…

God dang, that's a lot of Genin walking into the Academy, was my first thought to seeing the Academy the way it was when Kakashi, Naruto, Sasuke, and I finally reached our destination point. What I find amusing about this was that Kakashi kept carrying Naruto and Sasuke all the way to the Academy until now, where he was just finally letting them go. Naruto and Sasuke adjusted their clothes before glaring at Kakashi, who just ruffled their hair. It was shortly right after that that Kakashi did the same with me.

"Try not to expose too much of your skills—there are probably a lot of shinobi scouting out the place for competition," Kakashi told us, glancing aside to look at a lone Genin who wasn't doing too good of a job of being subtle when it came to reconnaissance. "So Chōko…keep your glasses on, Sasuke, don't expose your heritage, and Naruto—try to keep quiet."

"Right, Sensei!" Of course, even though Kakashi told us not to, I doubt Naruto would be able to stay quiet. It just wasn't in his nature.
And knowing my luck, I doubt I'll even be able to keep my glasses on—seriously, I need to do something about that soon before it almost gets me killed.

*I've gotten this far, but only because I'm lucky!*

As for Sasuke, considering what the first part of the Chuunin exams held…yeah. We are totally not great at listening to Sensei. I think he knew that as well, but he was just giving us a heads up.

"The second we enter through those doors, we will be watched by many shinobi…" Kakashi told us as he placed his hand on the door. "I'm only escorting you guys to a certain point. Once you reach that point, it's all up to you three to reach Room 301. Do try to stay on task."

Having said that, Kakashi opened the door and we entered the Academy. There was a multitude of confused foreign shinobi bustling around the first floor. I wouldn’t blame them, as the Academy was a huge building. The way it was designed, one could easily get lost if they didn't know their way around.

The hallways were constructed so that there were many unnecessary turns, with loops that could make a person walk around in circles without realizing it. The stairs were located in different places, so as to throw off anyone who managed to make it to the next floor. Some doors have also been constructed to be decoys. You really had to be careful…

I might have gotten lost a few times during my initial days as an Academy student…but that's not the point. One aspect of the Chuunin exams is that it would really benefit anyone to take the time to actually interact with the shinobi of the village that the exam is taking place at. Otherwise, good luck gathering crucial information elsewhere—I'm sure that will go well.

I'm not too sure how it went with Team Kitsuchi and Team Darui, but Team Ao had asked us about the location of the room inside the Academy building before turning in their applications. There are subtle markers inside the Academy hallways that could very well lead you to the location you wish to go to—you just had to look for it. Once you knew where to look, getting lost was a thing of the past…

Yeah, if you couldn't tell, my shitty vision was the reason I got my ass lost in the Academy hallways. Then I got my glasses and it was as if my world had been expanded!

Though really, traversing through the Academy took some skill if you weren't someone with information about the building. Though, considering how Team Darui and Team Kitsuchi, like Team Ao, had come into Konohagakure with their Kage, it would make sense as to how they would have information regarding this specific building. It was almost as if the Hokage had been pulling some strings to ensure that our visitors would make it to the first part of the exams. It doesn't sound fair, but what are you going to do?

"Well, if it isn't my eternal rival, Kakashi!" And it seems as though Kakashi's greatest nightmare has come true, with Gai waiting for him right at the Academy building entrance.

Kakashi seemed rather strained—almost as though he didn't want us to leave him, but kept his emotions from affecting his words. "Go on ahead—good luck."

And that was Team Blast From The Past's cue to get going.

…

Making it to the second floor was easy enough—I doubt any of us would forget our way around the Academy, considering how many times we have been through this building for D-rank missions (I
shuddered at the memory)… We might have had a couple of Amegakure and Kusagakure teams following after us as we navigated our way through the first floor. It was a smart move, actually. I could only assume that Karin had used her abilities to lead her team to the third floor.

Anyways, much like the first floor, the second floor was just as crowded with baffled shinobi—just more so than the first floor. It was really crowded—to the point of immense discomfort. I don't do so well against crowds, and considering how many foreign shinobi had their eyes on us, Konoha-nin… it was unnerving.

"Hah! You plan on taking the Chuunin exams with that!" Oh, I believe a certain Chuunin duo is trying to throw off potential candidates for the Chuunin exams.

Again, it might not seem fair, but it was actually part of the Chuunin exams for applicants to be weeded out, much like how the first year of the Academy was spent weeding out students. Considering the stakes of the Chuunin exams, no one would want to have any applicants that couldn't get past a simple genjutsu as this one…

Though, to be fair, if I hadn't already known about what went on right now in these halls and the fact that we just went through one flight of stairs, I wouldn't have known that this place was under a genjutsu. I don't do so well against genjutsu—especially if I'm caught up in the moment. But what I am good at is seeing through transformations—especially if they're on people I've known over the years.

"You should quit now." Hagane Kotetsu should really find a better way to separate his young, Genin form from his usual older self. It would really help in throwing off the people who knew him.

"You're just a little kid."

Lee certainly looked annoyed as he allowed himself to get kicked around by Kotetsu. It was probably Team Gai's tactic to keep their skills to themselves until the time came. A smart move…I wonder how long Lee will be able to keep it up, though.

"Yeah, yeah…" As always, Kamizuki Izumo was always by Kotetsu's side. If it wasn't for the fact that these two dorks were good friends and old teammates of Iruka, I doubt I would have remembered them the way I do now.

"Please let us through," Tenten practically pleaded as she walked up to Izumo and Kotetsu, the two currently blocking off entrance to the supposed Room "301". She got knocked back rather roughly and landed right next to Lee. Neji didn't hesitate to go to his teammates' side, as the three of them continued to put up a front that would make others underestimate them.

"Horrible," a Genin in the room remarked, whether it was to continue the current façade of weakness or someone who genuinely believed the scenario before them—I don't know.

There was a lot of mindfuckery when it came to the Chuunin exams, so one had to be really careful. For a Yamanaka, like Ino, this was child's play. I wonder if she and the others are already in Room 301…

"What did you say?" Kotetsu narrowed his eyes as he looked around the room for the person who made the comment. "Listen. This is our kindness."

"The Chuunin exams isn't easy…" Izumo picked off where Kotetsu began. "Even we have failed it three times straight. Those that take this exam and end up resigning from their shinobi career. Those that die during the exam—we've seen it all."
"And Chuunin often become captains of military teams," Kotetsu added. "The failure of a mission. The death of a comrade… That is all the captain's responsibility. Yet, kids like you think you can pass?"

I really gotta give Kotetsu and Izumo props for being able to pull off such strong psychological game. Too bad that Team Blast From The Past had seen through it all.

"We are just thinning out those that will fail anyway," Kotetsu continued. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing really," Sasuke remarked with a smirk that was mostly hidden behind the mask he wore. "Though, can you move aside? You're in our way."

"You know, you two ought to use better transformations, Kotetsu, Izumo…" I had not meant to reveal the two's identities and it only took me a second to realize what I have done, which really made my face turn red when the two Chuunin in disguise stared at me.

"H-How did you know our names?!" Izumo tried to play it off ignorant—trying to appear more surprised than annoyed.

"Aren't you that couple that used to be Iruka-sensei's teammates-ttebayo?" Naruto could really be dense and in case anyone was wondering, Izumo and Kotetsu were in fact a couple. I know, surprising—not really, these two were so inseparable that it's actually a fucking wonder that they haven't gotten married yet. "You two come to Kakashi-sensei's game nights."

By the way, did you know that Kakashi held games of the somewhat gambling kind at Casa de Uzumaki? Well, now you know and this is honestly how we've gotten to known Kotetsu and Izumo…apart from Iruka and Kakashi, who liked to bring up things that Team Ibiki wanted to keep dead. And just to clear things up, Morino Ibiki had been the Jounin-sensei to Umino Iruka, Hagane Kotetsu, and Kamizuki Izumo—the very same team that had failed the first ever D-rank mission in the history of Konoha, with a Jounin-sensei that got banned from ever taking on a Genin team…ever.

The more you know—it's hilarious knowledge to have!

"Grr…" Oh, and it seems that Naruto pissed off Kotetsu, who was silently fuming at the blond-haired knucklehead.

"I think we should go before Kotetsu murders us-ttebayo." I quickly grabbed onto Naruto and Sasuke's arms, and started running as fast as my legs could take me, while dragging my teammates along.

This action might have thrown off a lot of Genin who had been watching all of us…except for Team Gai, who had caught on to what was going on. Really, it pays to be observant and analytical.

…

It didn't take us too long to reach the stairs leading to the third floor. My heart was racing, my adrenaline pumping—I honestly should have shut Naruto up then, because Kotetsu's Killing Intent was intense. I feel bad for the Genin sensitive to Killing Intent who had to experience that, because Naruto couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"It kept those people from following us-ttebayo." Naruto did make a point…

"Though you could have done it without pissing off Kotetsu!" I snapped at Naruto. "Let's just hope Izumo can keep him calm."
I am not looking forward to Kakashi's next game night…

"What the hell was that about?" Oh, hey. Tenten. Looks like Team Gai managed to get by without ever having to reveal any of their skills. Nice.

"How's it going playing the weak and gullible Genin?" Sasuke asked.

Neji scowled. "Not pleasant."

"Sasuke-kun!" Lee suddenly exclaimed. "Fight me here!"

"Lee!" Tenten frowned. "Not now…"

"But…I have been waiting for this day." Oh, did Lee actually put aside every little chance to challenge Sasuke just so he could wait until this very day to do so? That's just sad—though I do give props for Lee's self-control. He had more than I originally presumed…

"You could get me after we make it to Room 301," Sasuke said. "I'd rather not be late."

Lee thought about it for a moment and nodded his head. "Punctuality should be of our concern for such an occasion—thank you for reminding me of that."

Sometimes, it just took a small wake-up call in order to snap Lee out of it.

…

There was really something about entering Room 301 when it was actually full of people. Like, holy crap—that's a lot Genin! This room could hold up a large of people at a time—it reminded me a lot of certain rooms at the university I attended in my past life. I believe this is where shinobi go to continue learning the rather difficult shinobi language that was English, if they wish to become Chuunin instructors or are in the midst of becoming Jounin. There were also other classes that were held here, for graduates, but I'd rather not get into them.

"Sasuke-kun, you're late!" And there goes Ino, forgetting that Sasuke did not liked to be touched.

Sasuke had an annoyed expression on his face after Ino jumped onto his back, her arms wrapped around his neck. The mask really hid most of his expressions, though I could tell he was somewhat embarrassed with the way Ino was clinging onto him. The way he looked at me afterwards, with eyes that practically pleaded, "Help!" made me walk over to Ino and tell her to give Sasuke some space.

"Sorry!" Ino laughed as she rubbed the back of her head. "I was almost worried you three weren't going to show up…where are Sakura and the others?"

"They should be arriving soon…" Team Yamato was probably navigating through the hell that was these crowded hallways right now. "Sasuke, are you fine?"

"S-Soft…" was all Sasuke could say before he turned away.

"Soft…?" I arched my brow before suddenly exclaiming as Chōji wrapped his arms around me in an embrace.

"Why didn't you come home last night?" Chōji seemed sad.

"I…I don't know…" I felt bad, because I made him go home alone. "I didn't mean for this—sorry…"
"Just know that Kaa-chan and Tou-chan told me to tell you good luck." Chōji grinned at me as he released me.

I smiled. "Thanks…"

"Again with that getup?" Shikamaru asked us as he looked over Sasuke, Naruto, and I.

"It's her idea, in case any of you are wondering." Sasuke did not hesitate to throw me under a bus, as usual.

"It's nice to see that all nine of our class's rookies are taking these exams." And there was Kiba, with Shino and Hinata, making their way through the sea of Genin in this room.

I questioned Kiba's wording until I recalled that there were a lot more rookies from Konohagakure than one would think come this Chuunin exams. In order to specify, Kiba had mentioned the class we had all attended, which had been taught under Iruka. Sakura had been part of an entirely different class, with Sai being a rather mysterious Genin with not much of a past, and Haku being a Genin of an entirely complicated situation.

"I wonder how far we'll get…" Kiba grinned as Akamaru, who continued to keep his usual position on his partner's head, barked.

"I h-hope we can get through this, together…" Hinata stuttered a bit, most likely nervous from the high tension in this room.

It didn't help that our familiarity with each other was attracting attention. It was just so weird, how dynamics can really change a setting. Still it was unnerving with how many people were looking at us, that I was about ready to go back to the door and see if Team Yamato had arrived yet…only to bump into the chest of someone who had gotten right behind me.

THUD!

"Agh…" I landed flat on my ass, glasses having fallen off my face because of the rough impact I had. I freaking hate this situation…and the amount of people in this classroom made me feel uncomfortable. I was worried if someone would break my glasses, so I immediately started looking.

This is a sign—I really should invest in eyewear like Chōjūrō's after this...

Fortunately, my hands came across the familiar feel of my glasses and I placed them on…only to quickly discover that these were not my glasses. The feel of the circular lenses might have been familiar, but the way it felt on my face was not. There also came to be the fact that these lenses were not made for someone with hyperopia—oh no.

"I believe those are my glasses…" Someone—male, based on their voice—said as fingertips lightly brushed against the skin of my face to remove the glasses I was wearing. A second later, another pair of glasses was placed on my face and once my vision had cleared, I found myself face to face with a young man with ash-gray hair and onyx black eyes that were not unlike Sasuke's eyes, framed behind black-rimmed circular glasses.

I should have immediately recognized whom I was staring at…I should have. And yet, it took me nearly a minute of staring into those black eyes to realize that this was Yakushi Kabuto. My heart immediately started racing, and I could feel my face beginning to heat up from embarrassment. It did not help that Kabuto had smiled at me and, had I not known who this guy was, I might have actually considered this person to be a nice guy…
But that was not the case and holy shit, am I afraid of this guy! Manipulative with abilities that are far beyond what he says they really are—this guy was dangerous. Not even all the comedic skits and jokes I have seen and heard from Lee's spin-off and the abridged series could take away the seriousness that is Kabuto's character.

I have heard a lot about his character—what he has done in *Shippuden*, but I never got a chance to see for myself or rather, clarify what he has done. And the only reason I feel so uneasy around him is because of his connection to Orochimaru. Sometimes, I wish my memory wasn't so hazy and limited, but that's what happens when you have so many gaps in your knowledge when it relates to this world.

"What's going on here?" That familiar voice made me look away from Kabuto and I felt elated to see that distinct shade of pink hair and huge forehead that belonged to Sakura.

"S-Sakura!" I didn't hesitate to get off the floor after seeing that Team Yamato had made it to Room 301 on time. I ran over to Sakura and wrapped my arms around the medic-nin, trying my best to calm my pounding heart as I did.

"Are you okay?" Sakura would know something was up, just by listening to and feeling my heartbeat as I embraced her.

"J-Just nervous…" A big understatement, but considering the current tension in this room, it was good enough to not warrant any more questions from Sakura.

At that moment, our friends from Kirigakure, Kumogakure, and Iwagakure decided to join up with us, Karin noticeably absent—most likely her trying to stay close to her teammates. She was the only one out of her team to have interacted with us and I think she wanted to keep her affiliation with us a secret, considering the attention we were all receiving.

Curiosity drew my attention back on Kabuto, who seemed honestly intrigued with the amount of people that were with us. He stood up, having no other reason to stay kneeling on the floor, now that I was off the floor.

"You guys should be quieter, especially with how large your numbers are." Kabuto crossed his arms as he looked at us. "You all are friends, correct?"

"Yeah, what's it to ya-ttebayo…?" Naruto took the bait Kabuto had placed to gain more information—a confirmation, if you will.

Kabuto placed his hand on his hip. "If I'm also correct, quite a number of you are rookies, right? If so, just look at you—screaming like school girls…Geez."

He was mocking us, that motherfucker.

"This isn't a picnic." And I believe this is the start of round two to the mind games.

"Just who do you think you are?" Ino did not like it when people tried messing with any of her friends' heads—especially when it was right in front of her face.

"Yakushi Kabuto," Kabuto said. "And you might want to be careful about causing a scene. Everyone here is nervous about the exam."

"No shit," Suigetsu spat.

Kabuto barely managed to suppress an annoyed expression when he looked at Suigetsu. Chōjūrō
was quick apologize for his teammate.

"S-Sorry, we're from Kirigakure—the pressure to become a Chuunin is quite high for us." Chōjūrō frowned.

"Especially for us older shinobi..." Kiri added.

"So I've heard..." Kabuto responded. "Though, I can tell you foreign shinobi are anything but rookies."

Kurotsuchi grinned. "You've got us there."

"Though we're not rookies, for a number of us, this is our first time taking the exam..." Karui commented.

"For me, this is my fourth time!" Atsui seemed so damn proud of that.

Omoi wasn't looking too good, and seemed about ready to speak his usual spiel about his concerns, but Karui stopped him.

"Ittan and I have taken it at least five times." Akatsuchi didn't seem too bothered about his constant failures.

"It's all about learning from your mistakes..." Ittan remarked. "So how about you...how many times have you taken it—Kabuto, was it?"

"Well, this would be my seventh time," Kabuto replied. "This exam is held twice a year, so this is my fourth year."

"Not a lucky number," I found myself saying without actually thinking.

This brought Kabuto's attention back on me, much to my dislike, as he smiled and said, "You're quite right...but that won't stop me from trying."

"So how old are you?" Shikamaru asked Kabuto, curiosity mostly piqued from the fact that we had quite a number of shinobi of varying ages around us.

Kabuto adjusted his glasses. "I turned nineteen earlier this year."

"Huh, you're younger than Ittan and I by a year." Kiri nodded his head.

"You really know a lot about the Chuunin exams, though..." Naruto couldn't help but point out.

This seemed to be the opening Kabuto was looking for in order to bring his cards out—those very same cards that held a lot of information on them. "Maybe I'll share some information with you cute rookies."

I felt a shiver run down my spine then. This earned me a reassuring pat from Sakura, who I was still clinging onto for comfort. Sakura was such a sweetheart sometimes...

"Four years' worth of information lies on these nin-info cards," Kabuto explained as he took out a stack of cards. "Over two-hundred cards, and if I recall correctly...you must be Akimichi Chōko."

I froze when I saw Kabuto hold out a card with my information on it. Oh shit, he knows too much...

"Huh, you certainly look different from the picture I have on this card...no matter," Kabuto
remarked as he showed us the card that had a picture of me, back when I still had my long hair—holy shit, that felt like a long time ago, when really, it's been almost three months. "From what I've gathered, you're quite the celebrity in Konohagakure for punching the Sannin, Orochimaru, in the—"

"Th-That's enough!" I was quick to cut Kabuto off, shortly after I had distance myself from Sakura. "Please…I've heard enough already—I was eight…"

Stupid potato girl status…

"You're also a D-rank in the Bingo Books—you're quite the kunoichi for a rookie Genin." I really don't appreciate this attention I'm getting from Kabuto…also, I'm amazed he managed to drop the honorifics when it came to saying Orochimaru's name. Wow—he's good at keeping fronts when he wants to.

"Since when were you in the Bingo Books?!" Dammit, Kiba, can you be any louder?! I don't think anyone in this entire room has heard you just now!

Fuck my life.

Kabuto continued talking about the information he has gathered. He had managed to bring up the participating hidden villages for the Chuunin exams. Hoshigakure had been a hidden village that was supposed to participate, but the recent death of their Hoshikage had pulled them away from it. Takigakure was also supposed to have participated, but one could assume that the visitors from Kumo, Iwa, Kiri, and Suna drew them away. The Chuunin exams were rather unique, come this time. Otogakure was mentioned as a recently formed hidden village, of which Kabuto didn't have much information on. Getsugakure was also mentioned, though briefly, but that was it.

And just when Naruto seemed to be so nervous, as one would immediately assume from his trembling body, he suddenly blurted out, "My name is Uzumaki Naruto! I won't lose to you bastards, dattebayo!"

Now everyone was looking at us…fan-fucking-tastic—this was going to be a fun exam.

"We'll see about that!" And here comes Temari, with her siblings. I was wondering what was taking Team Baki…I'm guessing they got stuck within the crowd of Genin, all around us.

"I'm looking forward to facing all of you." Kankurō grinned.

"Good luck," Gaara told us.

I felt calm after hearing Gaara tell us that…then a certain Oto-nin decided to jump in, and attack Kabuto. While Kabuto was able to dodge, considering what I knew about Otogakure and the way sound works in general…he might have dodged the physical aspect of Kinuta Dosu's attack, but the sound waves were still there.

By god, I cannot escape physics in any shape or form, in this world. Physics! Stop making my head think!

Smash!

The glass lenses from Kabuto's glasses shattered, which confused quite a number of us, who had noticed Kabuto dodging.

"So why did his glasses…?" Sasuke was caught up on it.
"Sound…" was all I can really say. "Fitting, for someone coming from a place called Otogakure."

Dosu seemed amused with my response. "You're smarter than you appear…so you're definitely not just all brawn and no brain."

Son of a bitch—I don't think I have ever been so pissed off about a comment like that aimed at me. Resist…urge to use Killing Intent!

"You really shouldn't piss off our resident door-breaker," Shikamaru remarked.

"Shikamaru, shut up!" Stop bringing up the past that might have returned that one time—but it was only one time and you were not there to see it!

"B-BLEH!" Oh, and looks like Kabuto had just thrown up…

Stupid sound attacks…and gross!

"Heh…" Dosu's teammate, Abumi Zaku, seemed to find the entire scene hilarious.

I was expecting to see a similar expression on Tsuchi Kin, but it was anything but when I looked at her. She had a blank expression on her face as she observed us—almost as though she had been thinking about something. Then again—I didn't know much about these characters, save for their names. Along with that, I have a faint idea of what they have done, with Kin being the cause for Sakura's short hair in canon, though not in this reality since Sakura's hair has been short for quite a long time, now.

Huh, I wonder how that scene is going to play out—assuming it will happen, that is.

"I was expecting more from a four-year-veteran…" Dosu sounded rather arrogant as he talked down to Kabuto, who was currently being attended to by Sakura and Naruto. "And yet, to see a rookie Genin do much more than you…how pathetic."

Oi, I don't like being used as a sort of standard for someone else.

"Write this down on your cards." Zaku smirked. "The Oto-nin—definite future Chuunin."

"Not with that attitude, you won't…" Hmph…wait, did I say that out loud—shir! "Aaah!"

"You're next, bitch." Zaku scowled, only to get held back by Kin.

"Don't start…" Kin was definitely less overconfident here, unlike in canon.

Wasn't she mouthing off as much as Zaku? I don't fucking remember…

Before Zaku could even say anything, a huge explosion of smoke suddenly appeared at the front of the chalkboard in the room. A loud voice followed after, yelling, "Quiet down, you worthless bastards!"

This caught everyone's attention and caused everything to suddenly go quiet as the smoke began to clear. It was the exam officials, quite a number of them—all Chuunin, with the exception of Morino Ibiki, the man who stood in front of them all. It was strange, knowing the chaotic team he once led back when Iruka, Kotetsu, and Izumo were Genin…and yet, he was still such an intimidating guy and just so happened to be the head of the Torture and Interrogation Force in Konoha.

I could see Ino already beginning to put her guard up as Ibiki stared down at everyone with his pitch-black eyes. His stare, paired up with his large, imposing figure, was enough to cause everyone to
audibly gulp as he introduced himself as the examiner for the first test.

"Otogakure, stop doing as you please before the exam," Ibiki admonished the Oto-nin. "Do you want to fail already?"

"I apologize…" Dosu was quick to say. "This is our first time…We got a bit carried away…"

"Bah…" Ibiki definitely found Dosu's response amusing, being the sadist who he was. "Here's a good opportunity to say this… There will be no fighting without the permission of the examiner. Even if permission is granted, killing your opponent will not be tolerated. Those pigs that disobey me will be failed immediately. Do I make myself clear?"

…”

"This exam is sounding easy." Oh, you are so going to regret saying that, Zaku.

"We will start the first stage of the Chuunin exams." Ibiki looked all over the room, a grin crossing his face as he said, "Instead of your current seating assignments…you will pick one of these tabs in the seat assigned to you. We will then hand out the exams—make sure to state your name as you receive your exam."

Probably to take attendance and cross off those who didn't make to the room in time…

"Once everyone has been seated, we shall begin the written exam." Ibiki seemed to be enjoying the shocked reactions from many Genin who were surprised to hear there was a written exam.

Naruto happened to be one of those surprised Genin. "D-Did he say…written exam?"

"Just try to stay calm, okay?" I tried to be reassuring, but my body started to tremble. Past memories of college exams popped up in mind, and knowing that we were going to be separated from each other did not help.

"O-Okay…" Naruto exhaled shakily.

…”

…”

It took nearly half an hour for everyone to get seated and given their exams. I was not doing well, being seated around a group of shinobi who were complete strangers… That was until I felt a reassuring squeeze on my shoulder from Kurotsuchi, who sat to my right.

"Just stay calm, yeah?" Kurotsuchi grinned.

"You better get past this first exam…" And it seems Suigetsu was seated right behind me. Lovely… "Hey, stop moping around—it's unlike you."

Wow, nice to see how concerned you are about me…that's a first. "I'll try…"

"You better…" Suigetsu furrowed his brow, one of his sharp tooth protruding the way it did whenever he closed his mouth.

_Cute._

If Suigetsu wasn't the little shit he was, I wouldn't feel so conflicted about finding him adorable…not that I'll ever admit that to everyone, because I ain't taking any chances of him finding out. My gaze
shifted over to Ibiki as he explained the rules of the first part of the Chuunin exams. This was going
to be a pain in the ass, so I had to at least pretend that I'm following the rules…

Once the rules were said and done, with subtle hints to what this test was truly about (cheating
without getting caught—testing our information-gathering skills), the exam began. I flipped my paper
over, my eyes quickly focusing in on the problems. I held the pencil up, ready to answer the first
question that caught my attention.

I could already feel the apathy beginning to build up inside my body as I looked at the set of
questions on my paper. Only ten "simple" questions, nine of which were on this paper—I totally do
not like the look of that cryptogram. Fuck, man—this was going to take a while.

I skipped over question one, deciding to save that for later. The second question seemed simple
enough…well, it was at first, until I noticed it was one of those stupid word-based math questions,
with a side order of logic. Fuck this shit.

At least the history questions look simple—thank you Itachi, for your lovely annotated history books!

…

I miss that lovable Uchiha…well, let's see what the damage is with the rest of these questions
—YOU!

I felt my grip on the pencil tightened as I came across a physics based question. Physics…why must
you continue to taunt me?! I could already feel the frustration building up inside me as I read the
question. The reason I get so annoyed with questions like these is that, being who I was—a person
focusing on shurikenjutsu—physics was the very thing I had to take into account whenever I threw a
shuriken or a kunai. Velocity and all that crap—it's become almost automatic…

If there is a slight difference in the air resistance whenever I threw a projectile, I also had to
take that into consideration, as well as trajectory (or whatever the appropriate term is—I'm not a
physics expert). Like—I can do it on my own, since it comes so naturally to me at this point, but
having to actually write it down on paper is just—uurgh! This is seriously going to be a pain in the
ass!

Why can't I be like Sasuke and just copy like a good Uchiha? It's not that I'm saying I can't answer
these questions, it's more that I am fucking lazy. I like taking shortcuts sometimes to avoid doing a lot
of work, and it's the reason why I hate mathematics so much. Ironically, I did much better in
chemistry, despite it feeling like a second math class to me…

Speaking of math, look at this economics based math—oh man, at least I know I'll do better. I think
the reason I did better in chemistry, is because of a substance being used in problems, such as
stoichiometry. By that extension, with money being used in part of the problem, I will pay more
attention to the question. Funny, it always has to do with a certain substance, like elements,
compounds, or money. I'm weird that way—it has its uses, but for the most part, it can be quite
tedious…

Maybe I should have gone into chemistry instead…

Well, too late for that, since I kinda died in my past life and now have to deal with this shit. The
Chuunin exams would be like an extreme version of college to shinobi… It certainly feels that way
and dammit—why can't I cheat right?!

The one time you can cheat and you don't know how!
Uuugh, I blame college and their academic honesty policies…the fear of expulsion was enough to keep that fear of failure rooted deeply within my subconscious and knowing that if we get caught cheating a number of times…yeah.

Okay, might as well start with physics…Distance is…how much? Okay, got that down…like let's go for speed—not the drug.

...

God, the pressure is starting to get to me. And it's so freaking quiet—ugh, man, this silence is going to get to me if I don't stay calm. I might have to take a bathroom break to scream…

Of course, I shouldn't be complaining about I feel. Poor Naruto, over there, must be freaking out really badly because he's never been one for academics. He did decently, but the amount of knowledge needed for this exam…he needs help.

Too bad I can't do anything about it…all I can really do is help myself. That…just sounds so selfish and yet, as I said before, there isn't anything I can do about it. It makes me feel horrible…frustrated, even.

"Ah…" I frowned when I saw Naruto clutching his head, seconds away from a panic attack. The poor kid never did so well whenever he was put against a situation he couldn't solve—not with so many restrictions forced onto himself.

Luckily, Hinata had been sitting down right next to him and managed to calm him down… I wonder if Naruto is seriously going to take up Hinata's offer to cheat. Knowing Naruto, he'll still pass because he doesn't want to risk getting Hinata in trouble. This time, I don't think he'll have any regrets, though…

Haa…man, I'm seriously getting distracted, even though I should be paying attention to my own paper. Fucking ADHD, really screwing me up when I least need it to…this is why I needed help in college…

"Tch…" I clicked my tongue and started writing down a bunch of crap on the desk. Not like it'll matter if anyone sees, considering how much of a clusterfuck of work I'm going to be putting on this, with little to no context.

Let's get started, shall we?

Time passed—I might have blanked out completely for a short amount of time. Though, for some reason, I noticed how complete my work had been. It took me a couple of seconds to realize that someone had been helping me…and that's when I noticed some writing on my paper, reading:

"Thought you might need a little help…"

—Ino

Ino, you beautiful woman, you—I love that girl so much… I almost felt like crying and I kinda did, though, I mostly stayed quiet, acting as though the exam had finally gotten to me. I wiped away my tears using the back of my sleeve, looking up to check on Naruto, who seemed calmer than usual. I arched my brow at this, before feeling a familiar feel that still crepted me out to this day.

If I hadn't already recognized it, I would have screamed…instead, I allowed the sensation to control me as it made me write a small message on my paper.
That was definitely Shikamaru using his Kagemane. To see that our own friends were actually helping us, if we needed help…that was touching. I hope they don't get into any trouble, since this was a team effort. Though, considering how there was never anything in the rules against helping others cheat… It was mostly about getting caught, and I doubt those two had run out of chances, unlike the many people who were leaving every few minutes or so.

*I'll be laughing if they make a new rule because of us…*

I felt less tense, now, but still frustrated—though, mostly at myself. It was stupid, because I was frustrated at how useless I could be, in regards to helping my own teammates. I wasn't like Shikamaru, with his Kagemane, or Ino, with her Shintenshin. I also wasn't like Tenten, who was capable of using chakra strings to adjust the flaps on the lights to make a reflective surface.

I was just Akimichi Chōko…and I felt so stupid for feeling this way. Ugh, what the hell, man?! You're better than this, Chōko! You're not like this…

*I'm not like this…*

Leave it to an exam, such as this, to make me feel so…useless. Haa, it isn't the first time I have felt this way, taking an exam. It always is such a frightening experience, not knowing the content for an exam that is definitely most important. And yet, there's this exam…is it normal to feel this way?

"Just calm down, and take a nap…” Kurotsuchi suddenly whispered to me. "You look tense."

"Hn…” And it seems I am picking up Sasuke’s habits…lovely.

"Aha…just close your eyes, rest your head…and relax." Kurotsuchi smiled at me.

I stared at her for a moment, my eyes quickly focusing on the many Chuunin watching over us momentarily. I could see one of them just watching, waiting to see what will come from my discussion with Kurotsuchi. Since all the questions have been answered on my paper, I guess I should try and take a nap…there was a good twenty minutes left and I had nothing much to do…

I turned my paper over, but not before erasing the messages on them—don't want anyone seeing what went on here. Afterwards, I sighed and rested my head on the desk. I might as well listen to Kurotsuchi—she probably has more experience or knows enough people who took the test enough times, like her teammates.

You know, as much flak many of the older Genin get from their villages, they probably have the most experience to use in the Chuunin exams. For them, it is much easier to get past the very first parts of the exams. It was most likely the later parts that were giving them issues…

Yawning, I closed my eyes and tried to sleep.

…

I woke up to Kurotsuchi shaking my shoulder and Ibiki's loud voice.

"We will now start the tenth question," Ibiki stated. "Now, before we get to it… I'd like to go over the added rules for this question."

*Here comes the mindfuckery!*
At that moment, Kankurō entered the room with a Chuunin escorting him inside. However, Ibiki smirked and saw through the puppet Kankurō had used to disguise itself as a Chuunin. It must have been intimidating to hear Ibiki talking to you specifically, like it happened with Kankurō.

Ibiki just told Kankurō to sit down and it was right after he had, that Ibiki continued. "First, for this tenth question…you must decide whether you will take it or not."

Temari didn't seem to be doing so well against Ibiki's mind games, according to her reaction. "Choose?! What happens if we choose not to?!"

Ibiki kept a straight face as he explained. Choosing to not take it reduced a person's points to zero, which meant that everyone on that team would fail. This definitely pushed a good amount of Genin to exclaim that they'll take it…

And with that, Ibiki brought up the next rule. "If you choose to take it and answer incorrectly…that person will lose the right to ever take the Chuunin exams again."

The tension was high, as were the stakes—or so one would assume, because Ibiki had managed to successfully mess with everyone's heads.

"What kind of stupid rule is that?!" Kiba shouted, with Akamaru barking in agreement. "There are guys here who have taken the exam before!"

Kabuto would be a good example Kiba would use.

Ibiki chuckled darkly, like the sadist he was. "You guys were unlucky. This year, it's my rules."

Of course, one could also assume was that this was how Eternal Genin came to be. I found myself looking around for Ino, in order to see her reaction. She seemed mostly unfazed—looking rather bored, instead. The Yamanaka clan was in better tune with their minds. It was almost a clan trait…

"But I am giving you a way out." There's the bait that Ibiki was laying out. "Those that aren't confident can choose not to take it…and try again next year."

Silence…

It was overpoweringly silent, the tension so thick that you could cut it with a knife. Ibiki was good at what he did—I almost felt convinced, even though I knew what was going on. It was only appropriate for Morino Ibiki to have such an effect on people.

"Now let's begin…the tenth question," Ibiki began. "Those that do not wish to take it, raise your hand. Once your number is confirmed, leave."

All it really takes is one person…and once that first person declared that they were out, their teammates leaving out the door, it set off a domino effect. Teams were bailing from left to right. Eventually, teams stopped leaving, leaving us with a smaller number of Genin than before. It was so damn scary at how Ibiki was capable of implanting such a level of uncertainty in people's minds…

"Don't underestimate me, dattebayo!" Naruto suddenly blurted out.

I was not one bit surprised to hear Naruto's outburst. The stress might have gotten to him, but it was at least comforting to hear that he hadn't given up.
"I will not run!" Naruto shouted. "I'll take it! Even if I'm a Genin forever…! I'll will myself to become Hokage anyway, so I don't care!"

Of course, with what Kakashi told us that Hokage have to be Jounin…that might serve to be a problem for Naruto. But Naruto will always find a way—that's what makes him so special.

"I am not afraid, dattebayo!" Naruto panted heavily after he had finished shouting.

Ibiki kept his ground, his expression unchanged. "I'll ask you again. Your life is riding on this decision. This is your last chance to quit."

And this is the last bait that Ibiki will put out.

Naruto just smiled, his eyes looking at Ibiki's head on, without once flinching. "I follow my unbending words…that's my ninja way."

And just like that, any doubt the Genin in this room had, disappeared. It was honestly amazing how influential Naruto could be, without even meaning to be. It was nice to see that all of our friends had never once faltered to Ibiki's words. Suigetsu looked about ready to cry, though, and considering his reaction to being teased about the pressure being on to participate in the Chuunin exams—the poor guy probably has a lot of issues regarding that.

"Good decisions," Ibiki remarked as he looked over the room at the remaining Genin. "Now to everyone still remaining…I congratulate you on passing the first test!"

Made it!

There's not much to say about what happened afterwards, as these were events of the mostly canon kind. The explanation regarding the purpose of the first part of the exam, the scoring criteria and whatnot, and the reasons why people were failed during the exam (for cheating badly)...eventually, we caught a glimpse at how important information could be, through Ibiki's torture scars. It frightens me how that could be any of us, in Ibiki's place. One would have to have a really high tolerance for pain...and to be honest, since we started training, that tolerance has a tendency to develop.

You have chakra to thank for that—which is why it's such a bad idea to be low on reserves when you're in such a pinch. It makes you so much more vulnerable...so very vulnerable. And yet, there are still moments where even one little hit can still spark pain, as small as it was. The human body in this world is strange, especially if the body belongs to a shinobi.

At that moment, a certain dango-loving kunoichi made her appearance. I was almost happy to see her again as, after all, it's been nearly three years since any of us had last seen her, Mitarashi Anko.

"You guys, this is no time to be celebrating!" Loud as ever, Anko was—she was almost like Naruto. "I am the examiner for the second test. Meet me tomorrow at Training Ground 44! You have until eleven in the morning, otherwise you'll be left behind, got it?!"

Silence…

"You have bad timing…" Ibiki remarked, much to Anko's embarrassment.

Anko tried to brush it off by turning her attention to the remaining amount of Genin in the room. She smiled quite briefly—for what, I don't know—before commenting on the remaining amount of Genin. "Ninety?! You left thirty teams!"

Wasn't the original number seventy-eight, with twenty-six teams...?
Oh crap, looks like this is where the deviation occurs yet again. This is seriously going to be one hell of a Chuunin exam.

"This time, there are sure a lot of outstanding ones," Ibiki remarked.

Anko didn't seem too impressed. "Bah, it's fine—I'll at least cut them in half in the second test. Everyone—you are now dismissed…so leave!"

With the first part of the exams out of the way, everyone was eager to leave the once tension-filled room. I was quick to join up with Naruto and Sasuke, bringing the two of them close together into a group hug because of how stressful the exam had been. Our group hug brought in the rest of our friends, who were still coming down from the fright that Ibiki had given them. Ino was literally the only one not affected…right after Sai.

As we all joined up, ready to do whatever it was that we were able to do, now that we were free, I look over my shoulder, my eyes widening slightly when I saw Anko being surrounded by a trio of girls.

There was a girl with really curly hair that was tied up in a manner that reminded me of a poodle in such a cute way. There was another girl with purple hair cut so distinctly. And one more girl with spiky hair, much taller than the others and silent, using the signs she made with her hands to speak.

It took me until we had left the Academy building to realize who those three were…it was Kasumi, Fuki, and Ami. And the reason why Anko had been absent during those years was because Mitarashi Anko had become their Jounin-sensei. Yet another deviation had occurred…and this was where these three had ended up.

_Funny, this never happened in canon…_ 

And I don't mind this change one bit…

... 

... 

"So what do you think we should do, now that we made it past the first part?" I found myself asking my teammates, shortly after everyone had gone their separate ways. With what we had to do tomorrow, everyone wanted to make sure they were ready for anything.

"Hey, you know how we have to go to Training Ground 44 tomorrow?" Naruto brought up. "It's also Tanabata-ttebayo…"

It took me a bit to catch on. "Right—it's Kiba's birthday!

"Kinda sucks that it happens to be on the second part of the exam, doesn't it?" Sasuke remarked. "So how about we do something to celebrate? Both for passing the first part of the exam and to celebrate a birthday Kiba will be having to spend taking an exam?"

"Huh…where do you suppose we should have this party?" I'm liking the idea, but I would like some more information on what we should do.

"Heh, guess who got Sai to steal the keys?" Sasuke asked as he held up a couple of keys.
"You didn't…" Those…couldn't be those keys, would it?

Sasuke threw up the keys and caught them in his hand. "The keys to the Uchiha compound…yeah, that's what they are."

"Kakashi-sensei is going to get mad at you, dattebayo!" Despite what he said, Naruto was awestruck.

"So how about we go all out?" Sasuke suggested. "I mean—we went through a lot today."

No kidding… "Alright, so what do you suggest for food? Oh—and is this a surprise party of sorts for Kiba?"

"If we want the surprise to get through, then yeah."

Kakashi is so damn protective of these clothes…

"That sounds like a plan!" I felt myself grinning. "Heehee, I'm liking this idea!

"I'll make the invitations-ttebayo!" Naruto was quick to say.

And that was that. If it wasn't for the fact that, over the years before graduation, Kakashi hadn't made us get over our trauma of what had happened at the Uchiha compound on the day of the massacre, I doubt any of us would feel comfortable about having a party there. Hound might have helped us a bit on the day we got Shisui's ashes, but it was Kakashi who helped us through the rest of it.

I don't remember much when I woke up the next morning. All I could really tell was that I was currently clinging onto the firmest pillow ever and I was comfortable…somewhat. There was something clinging onto my waist, but I didn't want to open my eyes to see what it was. I just kept my eyes closed and buried my face into firm pillow in my embrace.

Then an extremely loud voice assaulted my years with the wrath of a thousand moons. "What is going on here, my youthful Genin?!!"

My eyes snapped opened wide then and everything suddenly came in like a wrecking ball (to be making such references, I must be really out of it). My head was killing me, and the light—it was so bright. And it stayed that way until my eyes grew accustomed to the lighting's brightness.

Soon after, I noticed my glasses weren't on my face and just as I was about to look for them, someone placed them right on my face. Slowly, I blinked.

"Bluh…" Everything came in, one thing at a time, until I found myself staring into a pair of dazed-looking white eyes.

White, huh…where have I seen that—oh shit.

"Y-You're on me, Chōko-san…" Neji's face has never been redder.

That woke me up immediately as I shrieked loudly—an action that I quickly regretted as my head throbbed painfully. I could feel whatever was clinging onto my waist tighten, as well as a voice that
sounded a lot like Lee's muttering something…

_WAIT_

I swallowed hard and looked down, barely managing to stifle a scream when I saw that Lee was clinging onto my waist—still somehow asleep. Maito Gai was staring at the three of us, with a baffled look on his face as he tried to make sense of the situation.

I was still trying to make sense of this situation—are we sleeping in the same bed?

"I think you should leave…" Neji looked pained as he said that.

I did not hesitate to do as Neji had suggested, so I stumbled out of the bed and just got the fuck out of dodge.

…I was a sight for sore eyes by the time I reached Casa de Uzumaki. Kakashi was sitting at the sofa, reading _Icha Icha Paradise_, as usual, but with a rather amused expression on his face.

"So how was your morning?" Kakashi knew what I didn't…that was bad.

"My head is pounding, all I can really remember is waking up in bed with Lee and Neji…" Oh _god_, the context needed for that situation—I need to find a better way to word that. "Where's Naruto?"

"Under the kitchen table, snuggling up with the kits," Kakashi replied. "He's the only one who made it home, after we crashed that party."

"Uuuurgh…" Oh, looks like Naruto is up.

"What time is it?" Please don't tell me we're late…

"You got at least three hours to reach Training Ground 44," Kakashi said as he turned the page to his book. "I suggest you look for Sasuke, since none of us could really find him and again, Naruto was the only one who made it home."

"All I remember is jumping out a window, looking at a wall, thinking, 'I don't think I'm sober enough to make this jump'…" Naruto said sluggishly as he walked out of the kitchen. "And then I woke up here-ttebayo."

Sober…oh, _right_! That party—yeah, everything got hella crazy once we got into the booze, ahahahaha… As we are Genin, that makes us legally adults and as adults, we could drink…we just never had any reasons, and the reason things escalated when they did was because we got into the moment.

There are still gaps in my memory, but at least now I know why everything is so damn confusing…Augh, my head…what the hell did I drink?

_How much did I drink?_

"So yeah, about Sasuke?" Kakashi brought up again.

"Oh crap!" Naruto and I both exclaimed.

We both ran upstairs to go grab our sealing scrolls, which contained our backpacks that had everything we might need for the second part of the Chuunin exams. I went overboard with the
excessive weaponry again, but screw it—I am not taking chances and right now, I really need a pair of sunglasses, because this light just hurts.

"Catch, Chōko-chan!" Naruto was quick to say as he threw a pair of black sunglasses at me. He was wearing a pair of his own, that were orange in color with black lenses.

I quickly placed on the sunglasses, not really caring that I had to replace my glasses with them. I'd rather have shitty vision than deal with my current light-sensitive eyes.

"Okay, where to?" I was quick to ask.

"Aaaahhh…" Naruto stammered. "Everywhere?!"

"Konoha is a huge place!" Depending on the location of a place in this village, it could take a day or two to get there—it was that big.

"Search everywhere near the Uchiha compound, then-ttebayo!" Naruto suggested.

"Oh god—we are so screwed!" I tugged on my hair.

In hindsight, at least last night could be considered a great send off for anyone who dies in the Forest of Death…hungover me is a very morbid person, I am discovering.

"You should have seen Sai," Yamato said as he walked past Naruto and me. "He was an emotional mess when I dragged him back here."

Oh, really—not the point!

"I have no memory of this…" was all Sai said as he walked out of his room, staggering somewhat as he held a hand to his head.

"That's a load of bull and you know it." Yamato could be so blunt…

Morbid thoughts aside, at least Kiba had a great birthday party that we could possible laugh at for years to come, once our memory comes back of the event…hopefully soon, because we really need to find Sasuke.

"Sasuke!" I yelled as I ran down the stairs, with Naruto following after me.

God, this sounds like every Naruto episode ever whenever Naruto and Sasuke are being rivals…

We spend a majority of the three hours we had, looking everywhere for Sasuke. We even checked the Uchiha compound five times—it was a mess inside. Like, holy crap—what happened last night?!

As we were slowly running out of time, until we had practically minutes, we were freaking out, in the middle of this mess, inside the Uchiha compound. We were just at a loss—we just couldn't find Sasuke…

And just as we were coming to terms that we would have to wait for the next Chuunin exams, this beautiful bastard decides to show up out of nowhere.

He was rubbing his eyes and asking, "Can anyone tell me why I woke up on the roof?"

Of all the places we looked over…as much as I wanted to complain—as much as we wanted to
complain, Naruto and I were just so relieved to find Sasuke, that we just dragged his ass all the way to Training Ground 44…with only two minutes to spare.

I'm honestly amazed that we were able to even find this place, considering how hungover we were and how unfamiliar we were with this location. Though, it's best not to look a gift horse in the mouth, and since we made it on time…whew!

"So…where did you wake up?" Ino asked me as soon as she came up to us, her eyes currently hidden behind the dark lenses of the sunglasses she wore.

A lot of Genin were wearing sunglasses…and by a lot, I mean all.

"I'd rather not talk about it…" I still remembered what happened this morning, and I'd rather push that out of my memory… "What the hell happened last night?"

"The party of the century!" Anko had practically appeared out of nowhere to me. She had been standing behind me when she said that. She took huge amusement in my startled shrieks that made a majority of the Genin all around clutch their heads in pain. "Ahh, there's nothing like hearing the screams of Genin so early in the morning…"

"Sadist…" I spat as I clutched my head.

"No shit!" Anko grinned widely before turning her attention to Genin that had gathered at Training Ground 44. "Welcome to Training Ground 44! Also known as the Forest of Death—a place that definitely lives up to its name!"

"If you're trying to scare us, that won't work on me, dattebayo!" And there goes Naruto, biting off more than he could chew.

I wasn't that surprised to see Anko throw a kunai at Naruto, so that it barely grazed his cheek. I might have gagged when I saw Anko lick at the blood running from the small gash on Naruto's right cheek. The poor boy was paralyzed with fear, thanks to Anko's actions.

"Kids like you are killed quickly, hehehehe..." Anko laughed. "Spraying that red blood I love…"

Anko sure loved to mess with people as much as Ibiki… Though, even when she was being a sadist, she still kept her guard up enough to hold up another kunai to a Kusa-nin who had snuck up behind her, holding the kunai she had thrown previously to her, using their obscenely long tongue.

"Here's your kunai," the Kusa-nin said.

Anko just licked her lips and said, "Why thank you."

I felt sick, just looking at that Kusa-nin…I know who that was—fucking Orochimaru, back again to try and screw things up! My head was hurting too badly for me to even want to take the time to comprehend crap like this…augh…

What a great way to start the second part of the Chuunin exams. Hungover, with a huge headache and light sensitive eyes—yeah, we are definitely going to make it through a couple of days in a forest named the Forest of Death.

Training Ground 44, two fours, double the death…I hate the number four…
3-31-18 Just here to tell you of the irony that IS ME TAKING UP CHEMISTRY AS MY SECOND MAJOR! Yeah, that happened, so lmao...

Before I even begin, I would like to bring up that babavang of deviantart did a thing and just—Team Blast From The Past has been done! Check it out, for it is extremely awesome! The photograph scene was meant to commemorate the fanart babavang made, in case anyone is wondering.

Anyways, holy shit, look at how fast I got this chapter up—and it's so long, at that, too! So yeah, look at all this crap that had happened. And why yes, Chōko did in fact wake up in bed with two guys, oh my!

But to clarify, all that happened was that they slept in the same bed...just sleeping, nothing else. Still doesn't make it any less awkward—especially when you have Gai as your wake-up call. What a great way to start off the Forest of Death, with a good number of Genin hungover from last night's party.

Seriously, that party, right there—it's been planned out since Christmas, so all I can say is that, about damn time! Man, does it feel good to get to a certain point! An honorable mention goes to ChibiFoxAI, who has helped with the conception of the party.

So yeah, I've gotten complaints in the earlier chapters about a certain trio of characters who weren't important to the plot being focused on, and I'm here to say that over thirty chapters or so later...you're wrong! Ami, Fuki, and Kasumi, Anko's Genin, are very much going to be part of this story from here on out. So do take the time to familiarize yourself with them, for they are minor characters in canon with a different role, here in this fic. For one thing, Anko is their Jounin-sensei—that alone says a lot. And remember, they graduated three years earlier than everyone else did—not too young, but enough to put them at an advantage against the rookies.

Oh, and don't mind me, pairing up Kotetsu and Izumo—if I had to pick a non-canon couple that would most likely work, so far, it would be them. They're definitely a thing in this fic, so I hope this doesn't bother anyone and remember—I'm quite open-minded about things.

That aside, as you can see, Chōko and exams do not mix. Like, at all. Though, I doubt anyone would be happy to take an exam—fuck exams, they make you suffer... And if any of you guys have complaints about Chōko feeling the way she did during an exam, she doesn't like feeling helpless—as though she can't do anything. It's who she is.

Also, confession time—up until I started this fic, I had a basic grasp of what Yakushi Kabuto has done. However, it is only until after I had started this fic that I had look into what I have heard and realized how much of a bastard he truly is, so do keep that in mind whenever you see Chōko being wary of Kabuto for reasons that do not include those. She is as wary of him as she is Orochimaru, so that's your basic idea to how Chōko is when it comes to Kabuto.

One part of the Chuunin exams to go, another part to go—by the by, except a POV chapter come the next chapter. Just prepare yourselves, everyone, because this one is going to be a special one, regarding someone whose POV has yet to be seen.

So that's it for now, so I hope you enjoyed this chapter, because I sure did and holy
crap, it's like almost 8 AM, I have not slept at all, and just—enjoy this chapter, dang it!

Until next time, everyone!
Sasuke

Chapter Notes

Before you read this chapter, I'd definitely recommend checking out the one-shot special that ChibiFoxAI and I ended up writing. Here's the more recent edition of it, since I decided to go through it again and clean it up in places. You don't have to read it, but if you want an idea of what happened at that party...then, yeah!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Years ago, when he had heard Itachi and Shisui were going to take the Chuunin exams in Amegakure, Sasuke had always wondered how it would be for him when it was his turn to participate in the Chuunin exams. He had never expected to be hungover—just nursing a massive headache, with huge gaps in his memory of last night.

"What even happened last night?" Sasuke thought to himself as he filled out the waivers that had been handed out to everyone.

Apparently, Anko wanted everyone to sign the waivers, so she wouldn't be held responsible for any deaths, of which were most likely to happen in the Forest of Death—especially since a majority of the Genin were hungover from last night's party. Sasuke was definitely having regrets when Anko so blatantly brought this fact up. She was enjoying his and everyone else's misery.

Sasuke sighed and adjusted his sunglasses—an accessory a good majority of the Genin that had gathered at Training Ground 44. He had Naruto to thank for the sunglasses, otherwise Sasuke would have had to face the evil that was sunlight.

…

Sasuke was not exactly in the mood to be serious. His head was throbbing, his stomach was growling from skipping out on breakfast, and there were too many damn things on this waiver for him to even care. And as much as he wanted to complain, Sasuke couldn't.

Poor Chōko was having trouble reading her waiver, so Naruto had to help her out, considering the fact that she had switched out her glasses for sunglasses. The two of them had also skipped out on breakfast, and for the Akimichi, that was a very bad thing. For Naruto—Sasuke just felt bad about letting his surrogate little brother skip out on breakfast because of him.

"How did I even end up on the roof?" Sasuke asked out loud.

It was a question that Naruto and Chōko couldn't even begin to fathom. Luckily, for all of them, they received an answer from a certain Iwa kunoichi, who decided to drop by and say hello.

"I think that was Ittan and I, ahaha..." Kurotsuchi had the best timing, Sasuke thought sarcastically. "So is it normal for Konoha to have shinobi sign waivers or is this something new?"

"Hell if I know..." Sasuke let out a puff of air as Ittan and Akatsuchi joined them.

"It's just a ploy to mess with everyone's heads." And there was Ino and her team.
Sasuke could already feel his body tense up, just in case Ino decided to be physically affectionate with him. It wasn't as though he hated physical affection, it was just that Sasuke wasn't comfortable with the implications Ino's affections held. He was especially uncomfortable with how close Ino had been the other day, before the written exam.

"S-Soft..." Sasuke hated that word right now...he just hated it so much.

"Chōko, you mind coming here for a second?" Shikamaru suddenly asked Chōko.

Chōko wasn't in the mood to question anything and just did as she was told...only for Shikamaru to stuff an unwrapped ration bar into her mouth. Shikamaru looked annoyed as he usually did whenever someone was being, "troublesome."

"Don't skip out on breakfast," Shikamaru said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out two more ration bars. "Same goes for you guys."

Even though Sasuke was sure that Chōko and Naruto had enough food packs in their backpacks, they had all agreed on making it seem as though they were the least prepared team and kept everything in their sealing scrolls. As they were in fact considered rookies, this would only make the other teams underestimate them. Of course, with how infamous Chōko had become, Sasuke was starting to question whether or not that plan would work...

Still—it was nice to see that Shikamaru was fussing over them, as he usually did with Ino and Chōji, in his usual Nara way. He was still the laziest person Sasuke had ever met, but Shikamaru was capable of being very caring in such a subtle manner.

"So what happened to have kept all of you from eating breakfast?" Chōji asked, his attention focused on his sister, like the overprotective older brother he sometimes was.

"They were looking for me all morning because they didn't know where I was." Sasuke still felt bad for that, even though it wasn't his fault he woke up on the roof to the Uchiha compound.

"Where were you?" Ino crossed her arms as she looked at him.

"The roof...you have those two to thank," Sasuke wanted to know what it was that went on through Kurotsuchi and Ittan's heads when they left him on the roof.

"I can vaguely recall saying something along the lines of, 'This is going to be funny' and that's about it." At least Ittan had an idea...

Kurotsuchi thought for a moment. "That sounds about right."

"I guess that explains why I found you two slumped against the stairs, laughing." Akatsuchi nodded his head.

"Hey—you'll never guess what happened to Chōjūrō!" And there came the Hōzuki and his team.

Suigetsu might have been a little too loud for anyone's comfort, as shown by how everyone all flinched. Kiri seemed so irritated, and Chōjūrō looked both pained and embarrassed.

From there, every one of their friends, save for Karin, who was with her teammates, began joining them under the tree. Even though they have waivers to sign, that still didn't prevent them from spending some time together. It was the least they could do, since they wouldn't be able to see each other once their teams had gone through those gates.
Sasuke was not looking forward to that. He was especially not looking forward to the seals that were going to be imprinted on everyone's skin, for safety precautions. According to Anko, while it was usual for the Chuunin exams to be merciless, this time, things were going to go a little different.

To reduce the amount of Genin killed during the Chuunin exams, seals have been created in order to allow a Genin a better chance at survival…and a better way to salvage their corpses. Anko liked her dark humor, and Sasuke was aware that she was deliberately using it to mess with them by blatantly explaining that it was better to send back an intact body than a bag full of random bones.

When activated, the seal sent up a flare for the ANBU to come and get the person who activated the seal, in case of an emergency or death. This also would signal that the person was dropping out of the Chuunin exams, if alive when activated. If dead, the seal acted as a repellant to any animal trying to go after the corpses. Anyone who had not reached the tower by the end of the time period—which was five days—would have their seals automatically activated.

It seemed like a simple enough procedure, though Sasuke suspected that the visiting Kage and their representative teams had something to do with the decision. Of course, Sasuke didn't really care much for it, as he was currently staring at the white-feathered chicken that Kankurō was carrying.

"Where did you—" Sasuke's eyes widened. "You didn't."

Kankurō grinned. "I named him Clucky!"

Sasuke arched his brow at this. He was quite sure that chicken was female, unless otherwise…then again, he never paid much attention to the Uchiha clan chickens. Though, he might have, when he was much younger. He certainly recalled an incident where he let loose a chicken inside the meeting hall during a meeting at the Uchiha compound when he was only three years old. Sasuke had gotten help from Shisui with that.

…

Sasuke truly missed that bastard… "So you're not going to give it back?"

"I stole Clucky fair and square." Kankurō held the chicken closer to his chest. "'Sides, he seems happy with me…right, Clucky?"

Clucky continued to cluck as Kankurō stroked the chicken's feathers. Gaara was looking at the chicken quite enviously and Temari just face palmed.

"You know what—just keep the damn chicken." Sasuke wasn't even caring for them, like the Genin who typically took on the D-rank mission to maintain the chicken coop at the Uchiha compound. "I don't even know how you're going to keep that thing alive in the Forest of Death."

Kankurō grinned. "We'll see."

"At least we'll have a source of food…" Temari sighed. "Oh, and if you haven't noticed, Kankurō… Clucky's a girl."

Kankurō paused for a moment and nodded his head. "Right…sorry about that, girl."

Clucky just continued to cluck, very much oblivious to the hell that everyone was eventually going to be subjected to once everyone entered the Forest of Death. Sasuke honestly felt sorry for the chicken…assuming she didn't make it past the first day and if so, the rest of these five days.

"Wait, if Kankurō is able to bring a chicken, why can't I bring my kits-ttebayo?" And there goes
"Because you have nine of them," Sasuke tried to be logical. "Do you really want to bring them into the Forest of Death?"

"Not really..." Naruto made a face.

Sasuke sometimes wondered what it was that went on in Naruto's head. Though, at the moment, he noticed how distant Neji was with Chôko, even though he was usually quite close to her, whenever they met up—especially when Lee was near. And yet, Lee was also keeping his distance as well, his face rather red every time he glanced at Chôko.

Chôko also seemed rather embarrassed to look at the two...

"Did something happen between you three?" Sasuke asked Chôko, Neji, and Lee.

He was not expecting their faces to go completely red. They almost reminded him of a tomato...

"N-Nothing happened!" Chôko was quick to blurt out.

It was much harder to see what Chôko was truly thinking while she was wearing those sunglasses, but Sasuke could still tell that she was lying. He had known Chôko quite a long time to pick up on her mannerisms. She was so easy to read once you figured her out...at least, that is how Sasuke felt. Though, Shikamaru was better at it than he was—that, Sasuke knew for sure.

"Please refrain from asking anymore questions." Neji adjusted his sunglasses.

Sasuke arched his brow at this. "Okay...so, if you guys don't mind me asking, where did everyone wake up?"

"Home—I got lectured by my parents..." Sakura frowned. "Tou-san was more lenient about it, but Kaa-san wasn't too used to the idea of a thirteen-year-old getting drunk."

"I think it's normal for civilians to forget how different life can be for shinobi." Haku smiled as he patted Sakura on the back in a reassuring manner. "I woke up in my room...I think Zabuza-sama said he found me stumbling around town before he brought me home."

"Yamato-sensei said he dragged me home from the party." Sai sighed. "He said I was an emotional mess...w-was I?"

Nobody could really answer Sai's question. It probably didn't help that no one really paid much attention to each other once the alcohol had been distributed. Well—Naruto might have an idea, but he wasn't too sure.

"Anyways, Shikamaru said he found me under the park slide." Ino grinned as she rubbed the back of her head. "How I got there, I don't think I'll ever know..."

"Shikaku-san said he found Shikamaru and me sleeping with the deer in the Nara clan forest." Chôji laughed.

Shikamaru made a face. "I cannot even begin to think on how we ended up in the forest..."
"Otou-san found me in the Aburame clan garden." Out of all of them, only Shino didn't appear out of place with his sunglasses. "Hinata-san and Kiba-kun were with me."

_Bark!_

"Don't forget Akamaru!" Kiba grinned as Akamaru made his presence known on top of his partner's head.

Hinata stifled a giggled. "Kiba-kun and Shino-kun were sleeping so peacefully together."

…

"Hinata!" Kiba's face was extremely red. "Why?!"

"Heehee…" Hinata covered her mouth as she giggled.

"Hinata-san, why are you so quick to exclude yourself?" Shino tried to act calm, but his face was just as red as Kiba's.

"I woke up before you two—that's why!" Hinata smiled innocently.

Sometimes, Sasuke wondered if the same thing that happened to Hanabi was also happening to Hinata. Though, unlike with Hanabi, Sasuke knew that it was Chōko who had a great influence on Hinata. After all, the two were each other's first female friend.

"Yugito-sama and Bee-sama took us back to the inn we were staying at," Karui decided to explain her and her teammates' location when they woke up.

"Ay-sama wasn't looking so hot when he woke up…" A small bead of sweat rolled down the side of Atsui's face as he rubbed the back of his head.

"What if don't make it through the second part of the Chuunin exams?" Omoi frowned. "Ay-sama might banish us from Kumogakure for disgracing our home…"

"Oh for the love of—Omoi, stop overthinking things!" Karui scowled at Omoi.

"The old man wasn't exactly happy to find out we were hungover come the morning," Kurotsuchi tried to reassure the Kumo-nin. "So if it makes you feel any better, we might be in the same boat."

"It's a good thing Han-san and Rōshi-san were there to take us back to the inn." Akatsuchi nodded his head.

"Those two are definitely okay." Ittan seemed rather pleased.

"Do you think our Kage are laughing at our expense?" Kiri decided to ask such a question.

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"Let's just try to make it through these five days!" Chōjūrō laughed nervously.

"You know, I really don't like how close we are…" Suigetsu huffed. "This is going to make things difficult once we're in the Forest of Death."

"Aww, is the Hōzuki actually worried about hurting people?" Chōko seemed so amused with
Suigetsu's comment.

"Shut it, flat one!" Suigetsu snapped. "I just don't feel like killing anyone!"

"Still, I don't think I have ever seen you so conflicted when it comes to such situations…" Chōjūrō looked just as amused as Chōko. "Are you sure you're Suigetsu?"

"Fuck off!" Suigetsu was pissed off. "I still like killing, just…"

"Aah, so that's what it is!" Kiri smirked. "You can't kill anyone who you know personally."

Suigetsu clenched his sharp teeth. "Shut up!"

"I think we should stop teasing Suigetsu…" Chōjūrō chuckled.

"So…" Temari began. "Sasuke…I think might have contracted myself with one of your clan's summons."

Sasuke arched his brow at this. "Which one…?"

Sasuke was aware that his clan had various summons and, had he not already contracted himself with Kakashi's ninken, he would have gone after one of the scrolls lying about in the Uchiha compound.

"Weasels…" Temari simply said. "This morning, there was one who scared the crap out of Baki-sensei."

"Weasels…oh, them…" Sasuke felt himself smirk when he recalled the weasels. Funnily enough, Itachi never contracted himself with the weasel summon. Sasuke assumed it had to do with the comment Chōko had said when they had first met her.

"So you're not mad?" Kankurō asked.

"Pfft, I already contracted myself with Kakashi's ninken, so I don't really have any need for weasels." Sasuke wasn't like his clan—he was more lenient about things. "Have fun with them."

"Riiight…" Temari seemed relieved.

"We'll still be friends, even if we have to take each other's scroll, right?" Gaara suddenly asked.

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Gaara's question really brought everyone discomfort. It wasn't exactly easy to imagine the "what if" scenario of having to battle each other for a scroll. The requirement was that each team had to have both scrolls, the Heaven and Earth scrolls, when they reached the Tower. They had five days to do it…

"The old man would have berated me for letting something as friendship get in the way," Kurotsuchi confessed. "But I don't really care for what he has to say—I'd rather we just do our best."

"No holding back!" Akatsuchi smiled.

"And trust me—I'll know if anyone is holding back." Ittan would know, based on the experience that came with age.
"It is an insult to hold back…" Neji remarked. "Please do not hold back."

"Indeed!" Lee agreed wholeheartedly. "Instead of fretting over the status of our friendship, think of it as your chance to see how everyone has grown over the years!"

"Lee is right!" Tenten nodded her head. "Even though most of us have only known each other for a short time, this is a good time to reveal our abilities. Everything that we have been training for will determine the outcome."

"We're definitely not like everyone else." Omoi sighed. "We are so different, that I just wonder what it is that the other teams think of us."

"Who gives a crap?!" Atsui exclaimed. "If anything, they should be jealous of us hotshots!"

"Whatever happens, happens." Karui smiled. "Though—I do apologize if we go a little too hard on any of you guys."

"Assuming it isn't you who gets their asses kicked!" Kiba grinned as Akamaru barked in agreement.

"We shall not go down so easily..." Shino adjusted his glasses.

"And while I won't be holding back, I will suggest that you give up if you're up against Neji-nii-sama or me." Hinata smiled as she twiddled her fingers. "The Jūken can be quite dangerous, and I do not wish to hurt any of you."

"Nor do I, but we will do what we must." To think that Neji and Hinata had once been distant, it was almost unbelievable, even though Sasuke had seen how the two had once been.

"Hey Sakura—you better watch your back!" Ino smiled as she wrapped her arm around Sakura's shoulder.

"I should be telling you that!" Sakura laughed.

"Medic-nin can be quite deadly." Haku smiled innocently. "And while I do not have the same abilities as Sakura-san, I am just as well-informed about the human body as hers, so do try to be careful."

"You know, I don't think we have ever seen Sai fight..." Chōji brought up a point.

"All the more reason to avoid him." Shikamaru sighed. "How troublesome."

"It certainly pays to keep certain things under wraps." Sai smiled, though it was anything but a genuine smile.

"This is stupid...so stupid..." Suigetsu looked so irritated, and yet...the tears that were streaming down his cheeks said otherwise. "It would have been better if I didn't know you, because..."

"Now, now, Suigetsu." Chōjūrō tried to pat Suigetsu on the head, only for his hand to come in contact with water. "It isn't like you to get so worked up over something."

"Despite all he has done, he is still just a kid." It was most definitely not out of place for someone, like Kiri, to call Suigetsu a child. Suigetsu might have been a Genin, but he was only just thirteen years old, as opposed to Kiri's twenty. In the eyes of civilians, Kiri would be seen as an adult.

"We are only human!" Chōko was quick to bring up.
"No matter what happens, we'll still be friends!" Naruto stated. "Okay, dattebayo?"

Temari laughed. "That's right…"

"You hear that, Gaara?" Kankurō smiled at his younger brother. "No matter what happens, we'll still be friends."

"Right…friends…” Gaara seemed so assured, but Sasuke wasn't sure if he was, as his eyes were hidden behind the sunglasses he wore.

With sunglasses, it was much easier to lie without one's eyes giving anything away. Despite that, Sasuke could tell that, apart from Gaara, everyone had spoken directly from the heart. They had meant what they had said…

"Just what are we?" Sasuke found himself asking aloud. He knew that they were friends, but there had to be more than that. It just seemed so strange that twenty-eight people can be so friendly with each other, despite the stakes.

Right now, it was almost time for everyone to start turning in their waivers. Then, they would receive their seals, and finally, they would be set loose inside the Forest of Death. To be so at ease with the thought of having to fight one's friends…it just made Sasuke want to know what kind of people they were.

…

Sasuke wasn't that surprise when Chōko had answered his question in her own, unique way. He might have arched his brow at the fact that she decided now was a good time as any to sing. However, it was her words to the song that gave Sasuke an idea just who he and everyone else was.

"We are fighting dreamers,

Heading for the top!

Fighting dreamers,

Fighting for what we believe in!

Oli Oli Oli Oh~!

Just go my way!"

Chōko just smiled, despite most likely being uncomfortable with the stares that were on her. She never was one for attention in such a manner. And yet—attention just loved to come to her. Even before Sasuke had first met Chōko, she still managed to find ways to put her existence out in the open. It was never deliberate, but if it wasn't for the fact that she wore glasses, broke all those doors, and was surrounded by so many friends, Sasuke would have never noticed her the way he had when he spoke to her for the very first time.

What Sasuke had never once admitted, was that he had been jealous of Chōko. She had everything that Sasuke wanted—attention, family that was always there, and people who just wanted to be her friend. And yet, it was thanks to her, Sasuke was able to get what he had wanted.

If she hadn't invited Naruto that day, Sasuke would have never met his little brother. He would have continued calling the Uzumaki, "Dead-last." He wouldn't have had anyone when he had lost everything.
Sasuke smiled as he wrapped his arm around Chōko's shoulder. "Right here, right now—Go! Let it out like a straight liner! Right here, right now—Burn!"

Chōko stared at him for a good four seconds before a wide grin crossed her face. She was happy, because this wasn't the first time she had sung this song. At the same time, she was embarrassed because that meant he had heard her, because Chōko usually sung this song to herself as she tried to force herself to climb down a tree during training.

What Sasuke had never told Chōko was that he always heard, because contracting himself with Kakashi's ninken ended up heightening some of his senses. It had its pros and cons, the cons being that Sasuke's sensitive hearing made it worse when he was hungover. Of course, that could easily be avoided, as Sasuke had no plans of ever drinking again. Unless otherwise, of course, Sasuke didn't have a firm grasp of the future.

"Down a difficult road,
Filled with endless struggles.
Where do you think you are going,
Following someone else's map?"

Though, what he did know was that this friendship they all had was something special. Sasuke wondered how often so many people from differing backgrounds could get along so easily. They were definitely different from everyone else.

"An insightful crow,
Comes along to tear the map.
Now open your eyes,
And take a look at the truth!
Yeah!"

Sasuke could tell when the others joined in when Chōko continued to sing, never mind that they didn't know the lyrics like him and Chōko.

"There's nothing to lose,
So let's GO!"

Sasuke was sure that everyone was staring at them, wondering what it was that was wrong with them, but he didn't care. He just couldn't. None of them could.

"We are fighting dreamers,
Heading for the top!
Fighting dreamers,
Fighting for what we believe in!"
This was who they were, and Sasuke wouldn't trade anything in the world for it.

Sasuke could feel his heart beginning to race as he and his teammates followed after the Chuunin, who was leading them toward one of the forty-four gates around the arena. He was afraid, but he couldn't let Chōko and Naruto know that. After all, it was up to him to keep some sort of balance in this team. It was also his job to keep the two of them safe.

It was half past two when the gates were finally opened and the first thing Chōko did before any of them had run off was detonate a smoke bomb. That gave them enough time to set up a distraction, with Sasuke and Naruto creating their own shadow clones. As Chōko had not learned how to make her own shadow clones, one of Naruto's clones covered for her.

Overall, six shadow clones had been made. One set of three would stay until the smoke cleared before entering through the gates. While that went on, the other set would follow the real Team Kakashi through the gates, eventually going their own separate way to throw off any one that had decided to target them.

If anything were to happen to the clones, Sasuke and Naruto would have an idea of who was targeting them. It also gave them a better chance to scout different areas of the paths they were taking through the Forest of Death and gather information from there after the clones dispelled themselves. It was killing two birds with one stone…

And Sasuke was quite proud to have thought up such an idea—though he had a little help from Chōko and Naruto. He couldn't have done any of it without them. Hopefully, the three of them could make it through the first day without any confrontations. Sasuke was not in the mood for conflict—neither of them was.

The headaches still lingered and they were only fortunate that the huge trees blocked out a good amount of sunlight. This allowed them to discard the sunglasses, and with Chōko's glasses back on her face, neither Sasuke nor Naruto had to worry about her shitty vision. Though, these same trees would prove to be a hindrance once the sun started to set. Thankfully, with summer, came long days—though the weather wasn't exactly pleasant. It was hot and humid, and those screams, just now, sounded too close for comfort.

Barely an hour into the exam, and things had already escalated.

"Do you think we should set up another distraction?" Chōko asked, shortly after they had stopped walking.

At the moment, their current position was on the ground floor, with the decoy teams having taken to the trees. Where they were, neither of them knew and they wouldn't until the clones had dispelled. One thing that Sasuke was quite glad about was that no one knew about Chōko and her fear of falling. Otherwise, everyone could have easily seen through the decoys.

Though, there was only so much the clones could do, as a sensor, like Karin, would be able to see past the deception. And really, it wouldn't be that good of an idea to repeatedly use such a distraction.
"Until those clones dispel themselves, we should refrain from making any more," Sasuke said. "You need to save your smoke bombs."

"R-Right!" Chōko understood. "And I guess it wouldn't be smart to make more shadow clones, since you don't have Naruto's stamina."

Sasuke nodded his head. "Exactly."

"So how are we going to work out our camping arrangements, dattebayo?" Naruto asked a great question.

"We should talk about it," Sasuke replied. "And while we're at it, we should start walking."

It was never a good idea to stay in one place for too long—especially in this death trap of a forest. Hopefully, everyone was still too hungover to try anything. Then again—that scream they had heard earlier made Sasuke think otherwise.

Of course, that was not to say that it wasn't some poor team coming across the wildlife in this forest.

*Roar!*

…

"Was that a tiger?" Sometimes, Sasuke wished Chōko kept her mouth shut…this was one of those times.

Apparently, the Forest of Death was home to tigers…lovely.

"I think we should move to higher ground." Sasuke was starting to feel vulnerable staying on the ground after making that frightening discovery.

"Can I take a piss first?" Naruto asked unabashedly.

Sasuke stared at Naruto for a good minute before face palming. "So many ways to word that sentence and you chose *that*?"

Sasuke truly wondered what went on in Naruto's head.

"Ehehehe, so can we-ttebayo?" Naruto smiled sheepishly.

Sasuke face palmed. "Five minutes—not here! Go into the bushes—I don't wanna see it."

"Be careful!" Chōko cautioned Naruto as he left to do his business.

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"So…" Sasuke began. "How is this going to work for you?"

Chōko blinked a few times and narrowed her eyes. "Are you really asking me that question?"

Sasuke felt his face heat up from embarrassment. "L-Look, you're the only girl on our team—I might as well."

How the hell did Kakashi do it?
"I'll go when I need to go." Chōko huffed as she crossed her arms and looked away. "Geez, so nosy…"

"Tsun-tsun..." was all Sasuke could think. He might have embarrassed Chōko, the small blush tingling her cheeks saying all. There were just some questions that were better left unasked, when it came to her. "Maybe that's how Kakashi did it..."

"Man! So much came out!" And it looks like Naruto was back. "I feel great now-ttebayo!"

Naruto really was lucky that Chōko wasn't like other girls, because most girls would have reacted negatively to Naruto's comment. Or, in the case of Hinata, would have freaked out.

Chōko was amused...and armed—why was she armed?! Sasuke really had no time to ask as Chōko threw an array of kunai at Naruto. Naruto was only fortunate enough to dodge. He was also quite fortunate that Chōko was still wearing her glasses, so her aim wasn't as accurate as it could have been, but at the same time, Chōko rarely missed...

"She missed on purpose." Sasuke could tell Chōko was making an impression and the reason for it, as he had just noticed, was because that was not Naruto. No one on this team kept their weapon holster on their left side.

"The hell was that for, dattebayo?!" The imposter did a good job at acting like Naruto, right down to the verbal tic.

Chōko smirked as she took off her glasses. "I suggest you tell us where the real Naruto is, because I won't miss this time."

And she meant that.

"You really should have tried better when you transformed into Naruto." Sasuke could also tell the imposter forgot about the small scar on Naruto's cheek. "You never know how much even a little scar could matter. And for the record, Naruto isn't left-handed..."

There was also the fact that the imposter didn't smell like Naruto, but Sasuke wasn't going to let that slip (nor was he going to mention that Naruto usually took a lot longer than that to do his business). The last thing Sasuke needed was for others to learn about his heightened sense of sound and smell. He was better off letting Kiba being known as the only one capable of such. Otherwise, it would expose a well-kept secret of Kakashi's and that didn't seem too fair.

"Hmph!" Smoke quickly enveloped the imposter, a sign that the transformation had been dispelled. "I guess I was just unlucky."

Once the smoke cleared, the imposter was revealed to have been a shinobi from Amegakure, as shown by his hitai-ate. He had spiky black hair and wore a white jumpsuit and a rebreather. He was taller than they were and also appeared to be older.

"You really ought to get your eyesight checked, because it seems as though yours is worse than Chōko's." Sasuke smirked. "Though, I should give you props for deciding to face us on your—"

Sasuke trailed off when his ears picked up the rasping of rebreathers...multiple rebreathers. The Ame-nin wasn't alone—oh no. Which meant that this confrontation was a set-up.

"Motherfucker." Sasuke reached into his holster, pulled out as many kunai as he could hold in one hand, and threw them in a manner that covered as much area in the direction he felt the rasping sounds from the rebreathers came from. He was lucky...so very lucky when he had done that,
because the Ame-nin's teammates had been so close to ambushing Chōko—had he not heard them when he did and interrupted them.

While the two other Ame-nin might have dodged his kunai, Sasuke had done what he had intended to—expose their presence to Chōko.

"Suiton Teppōdama!" Five balls of condensed water shot out of Chōko's mouth.

No one ever expected a kunoichi from the Land of Fire to possess an affinity for water. And when Chōko said she wouldn't miss, she didn't. Even if she had said that toward the Ame-nin who had disguised himself as Naruto, her threat still extended to his teammates.

The other Ame-nin were lucky that she had aimed for their knees. The sickening crack that came after the impact said all—they weren't going anywhere after that. And while that went on, Sasuke took the opportunity to attack the remaining Ame-nin.

The Ame-nin was still wide-eyed from shock—probably because he found out why Chōko had ended up in the Bingo Books the hard way. He was lucky…he only knew partially what Chōko was capable of.

It was better that way, Sasuke thought. Otherwise, another secret that Kakashi had been trying so hard to keep would have been exposed. Even now, Sasuke still couldn't believe Chōko, of all people, had killed the Demon Brothers. Of course, it had all been an accident, but it still surprised Sasuke. Chōko was unpredictable, that was fact.

But Sasuke wasn't as merciful as she was—that was most definitely a fact. It was a fact that the Ame-nin found out firsthand when a kunai was plunged deeply into his arm—courtesy of Uchiha Sasuke.

"I'll ask again for her—where is Naruto?" Sasuke looked the Ame-nin straight in the eye, Sharingan activated for a good measure.

Sasuke still had a long ways to go before he could use his Sharingan effectively, but he was still capable of using it to intimidate people who have heard about it. Based on the look of terror in the Ame-nin's eyes, he had heard of the Sharingan.

"U-Uchiha!" the Ame-nin rasped out.

Sasuke was impressed with how the Ame-nin were capable of tolerating pain…but for how long? Sasuke was honestly curious and he hadn't received an answer yet…

"Gah!" The Ame-nin reacted predictably toward Sasuke twisting the kunai in his arm.

"Where is Naruto?" Sasuke wanted an answer…and he wanted it now.

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Shattered kneecaps—that's what Chōko had left the other two Ame-nin, Mubi and Kagari, with after using the Teppōdama on them. When Oboro, the Ame-nin that had transformed himself into Naruto, found out about this, he was quite compliant to listen to what Sasuke had to say—especially after he found out that only Sasuke was capable of healing him. Unless he wanted to lose use of his left arm, which he most definitely did not want when he begged Sasuke to heal him.

"I can't do much about the other two, so I'd suggest you activate the seal." Everyone had gotten a
seal placed on a certain part of their body—for Sasuke, it was on his left arm, which was hidden under his arm warmer. "You won't be able to get anywhere with them, so you might as well drop out now before something else gets to you. And while you're at it, give us your scroll."

Even if they also had a Heaven scroll, Sasuke could still find use in it. Of course, as it turned out, this team had an Earth scroll. Sasuke was very quick to pocket the scroll, as Chōko had the Heaven scroll on her. It had been agreed on that Naruto was not to be trusted with the scroll, for reasons involving his tendency to get in trouble—such as now.

"We got lucky this time…" Chōko sighed in relief as she came back with Naruto, who had been tied up and hidden behind a tree. "If that had been me…"

"I would have burned them." Sasuke did not like it when his friends were targeted. He did not like it at all—not one bit. "And if you even consider coming back after us after I finish healing you, I'm going to burn you alive."

Sasuke looked at Oboro straight in the eye, Sharingan still activated.

…

"Did you really have to threaten him-ttebayo?" Naruto asked Sasuke, long after they had left the trio of Ame Genin to the mercy of the ANBU that would eventually come after them, as Oboro had activated the seal on the back of his hand the instant Chōko, Naruto, and Sasuke were starting to leave.

"Yeah, I did." At least, Sasuke felt it did. He needed to make a point—otherwise, he would have had to potentially deal with an Ame-nin that was taking chances.

"At least we have an Earth scroll~!" Chōko chirped. "Now all we have to do is worry about getting to the Tower!"

"Before that, I think now is a good time as any to dispel the shadow clones." After their encounter with the Ame-nin, Sasuke now wanted an idea of what it was that the shadow clones had seen as they were navigating the area above them, in the trees. "We might find something useful."

And they did. Along with that, Sasuke and Naruto now had an idea of the wildlife thriving within the Forest of Death. Tigers were indeed one of them, as were leeches (ick), bears, and, much to his displeasure, snakes. Chōko did not take too well to this and was trying her best to stay calm.

"I'll make sure to keep any snakes away from you," Sasuke assured Chōko.

Chōko bit her lip. "Promise?"

"Promise…" Sasuke wasn't going to let any snake near Chōko…nor Naruto. Hell—any snake that crossed Sasuke's path was going to get its ass killed. Sasuke just hated snakes…he hated them so much. "So there should be a river straight ahead of us if we keep going in this direction. I think it's best we find a way to settle down now, even though we still have hours before dusk."

The flare the seal had sent up might have attracted unwanted attention. The last thing Sasuke needed after one confrontation was another.

"So how are we going to do that-ttebayo?" Naruto asked.
"How about we dig a burrow or something?" Chōko suggested.

"How do you suppose we—never mind, I know how, so a burrow it is." Sasuke recalled that he had the ability to summon ninken… Though, he wasn't too sure how Hanī would react to having Miriku brought into such a dangerous place, he was willing to take his chances. "Besides, I already gave her a bath."

Shiba Inu did not like water…Sasuke found out the hard way when Miriku acted as though she was dying as Sasuke was giving her a bath. And by the gods, was Miriku ever so loud—Hanī definitely owed him a favor for going through that hell.

"Maybe while we're in the burrow, we should send out shadow clones to continue exploring-ttebayo?" Naruto was much smarter than he let on. "I can handle it—so don't worry, Sasuke."

"Okay, so we have a plan." Sasuke was pleased. "So let's keep moving."

"Right!" Naruto and Chōko agreed.

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In hindsight, Sasuke shouldn't had let Miriku to dig out their burrow. While the three-month-old Shiba Inu was much more capable than any of them had expected, after seeing how her pristine white fur had gotten so dirty from the dirt…Sasuke really had regrets.

"Ugh, Hanī is so going to make me give her a bath again…" Sasuke face palmed.

"Oh boy—Shiba scream." Despite what she said, Chōko was smiling. She was looking forward to it. To her, there was just something hilarious to how a Shiba Inu practically screamed when it came in contact with water.

"So one set of the shadow clones ended up saving Team Darui from giant spiders," Naruto suddenly said.

"Aww, fuck…” Chōko did not like spiders, so that meant Sasuke had to be prepared to set anything with eight legs on fire.

The things he did for his friends…

"How far are they from us?" Sasuke wanted an idea—just in case.

"They're within our range, but not close enough to find us easily-ttebayo," Naruto replied. "They have a Heaven scroll, so I don't think they'll be fighting us anytime soon."

"That's good to hear!" Chōko seemed relieve. "I was worried that we might have to go up against them…"

"Instead of worrying about them, how about you help me clear up the dirt pile that's here?" Sasuke honestly wondered how they were going to get rid of the massive pile of dirt…that kept getting bigger and bigger, because Miriku was still digging.

"I got this!" Chōko reached into her pocket and pulled out a sealing scroll to get rid of the dirt.

Sasuke stared at Chōko for a moment, not expecting that as her answer. "Right—I guess that'll work."
It's better than doing nothing.

*Bark! Bark!*

At least Miriku was having fun…

"So what do we do until then-ttebayo?" Naruto asked.

Sasuke thought for a moment before turning his attention to the river that was near them. "I think we should dunk ourselves in the river—I mean, covering up our scent would be a good idea, in case any of the wildlife has picked up on it already."

It was better to be safe than sorry.

…

Nearly an hour later, Sasuke realized that the burrow wasn't going to work out. While a great idea at first, in order for it to *truly* work out, they needed quite a *lot* of time, a ninen that *wasn't* a three-month-old puppy, and an environment that *wasn't* as pressing as the Forest of Death. Really, had they been in any other situation, a burrow would have worked out perfectly.

"I get you!" Good thing Chōko understood. "Truth be told, I don't think a burrow would have worked out anyways, since someone could have been watching us this entire time."

And just like that, Chōko had managed to make the situation even worse.

"Okay, that's it—we're leaving this spot." Sasuke knelt down to pick up Miriku, who was currently rolling around in the dirt. He briefly wondered how exactly a puppy like her was eventually going to become a ninen like her mother. "I'm not taking any chances."

*Rustle!*

Almost instantly, Sasuke and Miriku turned their heads, bodies tense and eyes very much alert. Sasuke was somewhat surprised with how in sync he and Miriku had been. Though, at the same time, Sasuke was concerned. The fact that Miriku had also reacted with him was enough to tell him that he wasn't just hearing things.

"Sasuke, what's wrong-ttebayo?" Naruto asked, most likely perplexed with Sasuke and Miriku's behavior.

Sasuke stayed quiet, focusing on every little thing that went on around them. Something had moved…and whatever it was, it had been *close.*

*Growl.*

And it still was, as denoted by how agitated Miriku had become. Her fur bristled and her teeth were bared as she growled. Miriku could tell something was wrong, and Sasuke knew it as well—he just didn't know what to do. Miriku, at her current age, was a ninen that relied entirely on her instincts. Sasuke wasn't like that.

Right now, at this current moment, questions were flooding his head. Questions regarding what he should do, should he do it, and what would happen if he did—it came all too fast for him. Sasuke wasn't that used to thinking on the spot like this. Especially when he needed more time to gather information, otherwise he could potentially jump into an unfavorable situation.
Suddenly, a tiny sliver of wood grazed Naruto across the cheek. It was so sudden, that Sasuke almost stopped to question why something like that would happen. Then Chōko yelled at them to watch out. And it was at that moment, a strong, forceful gale tore through the trees in their direction. Dirt, loose leaves, and twigs filled the air, obscuring their vision. Whatever signs of aggression Miriku was showing had ceased almost immediately as she started whimpering, burrowing her head into Sasuke's chest as he quickly tried to figured out what to do in his current position. He quickly glanced around, decided to take cover under some bushes that were nearby. He waited there, trying his best to calm Miriku down as he waited for the gale to die down.

There was no way that was natural. Someone had attacked them with a Fuuton technique—a B-rank, at least, or maybe even higher than that. It seemed too powerful to have come from a Genin. But then, Itachi was also rather powerful when he was still a Genin.

The thought that there was possibly a Genin around that was just as powerful as Itachi didn't settle too well with Sasuke. It just made him realize how dangerous their opponent was. Miriku must have noticed as well, considering how quiet her whines had become.

"Shh, shh…" Sasuke stroked Miriku's fur. "It's okay, girl—you don't have to stay. Go on, leave… please? Your mother's probably worried about you."

Sasuke was honestly touched with how reluctant Miriku was to leave him, even though the way she had her tail tucked in between her legs showed how scared she was. Still, it was for the best that she would leave. After all, Sasuke didn't want someone as inexperienced as Miriku getting hurt.

Miriku still let out a distressed whined before she finally disappeared in a puff of smoke. It was at that moment that Sasuke heard a sound behind him. Immediately he got off the ground and turned around, a kunai in his right hand. He let his guard down slightly when he saw it was just Chōko…and immediately tensed when he recalled the Ame-nin who had transformed into Naruto.

"What if…?" Sasuke couldn't help but think. He needed to do something quick to verify that this was indeed his friend…

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"What was it that you told Nii-san when you met him and me for the first time—and how old were you when you said it?" This was information that only Sasuke and his friends should know…after all, they haven't brought it up since Itachi left.

Chōko blinked a few times and then narrowed her eyes. "Really? Of all the questions to ask me, it's the one about Weasel and not the molar I lost in Kirigakure or how you accidentally learned the Mystical Palm Justu from Sakura?"

That…was definitely Chōko.

Chōko crossed her arms. "Oh, and I was five when I called him a weasel—because Chōji and I turned five that day."

Definitely Chōko—now Sasuke felt a bit bad for doubting her, but it was for the best.

"Sorry about that—just making sure." Sasuke sighed as he lowered his kunai. "I mean, with what the Ame-nin did with Naruto…"
"Nah, I get ya." Chōko understood. "You okay?"

"Somewhat…I had to send Miriku back." Sasuke exhaled shakily. The attack had really left him shaken up. "You?"

Chōko pursed her lips. "I'm…scared."

She most certainly looked scared. And when Naruto decided to show up then and there, Chōko nearly shrieked.

"Oops—sorry, Chōko-chan..." Naruto frowned. "Didn't mean to scare you-ttebayo..."

Chōko stayed tense as she stared at Naruto. She swallowed hard, taking a step forward as she asked, "What's our team name?"

Naruto blinked a few times. "What do you mean, Chōko-chan? Isn't it Team Kaka—"

Chōko didn't even allow Naruto time to finish as she rushed up to him and punched him right in the crotch. "Wrong!"

Sasuke flinched visibly, almost tempted to cover his own crotch as a result from watching the scene before him. Still, he was glad Chōko did what she did, because that was not Naruto. For the second time, it was an imposter and said imposter had keeled over onto the ground in immense pain. Chōko had not held back when she had punched the imposter in the crotch.

"Why does this seem so familiar?"

It shouldn't have been that familiar, but it was. And while Sasuke should have been relieved to see that Chōko had incapacitated the imposter, there was still a sense of unease that plagued him. There was something wrong with this, but what?

"We might get called Team Kakashi, but our actual name is Team Spiky Hair." It was a joke name of sorts, but it still gave them a sense of unity with it. At least, that's how Sasuke felt about the same, since all of them had spiky hair. "So who the hell are you?"

"I see...that nothing much has...changed." The imposter smirked, which was not a look that suited the face they were currently sporting. It was unsettling, seeing someone with Naruto's face looking like that. Sasuke was almost relieved when the imposter dispelled the transformation.

Of course, there was something unnerving about a Kusa-nin talking to them, as if he had met them once before. And while that might have been the case, considering last night's party and what happened prior to the start of the second part of the exams (this was the same Kusa-nin who had handed Anko back her kunai), that still didn't explain the underlying level of familiarity in the Kusa-nin's tone. From how quickly Chōko had distanced herself from the Kusa-nin, she must have noticed it as well.

"I think we should leave," was the first thing she whispered to Sasuke once she was at his side.

Just as Sasuke was about to respond, he stopped. Just now—he could have sworn he had just seen himself and Chōko get killed. His body refused to move, and his voice was lost from him. The Killing Intent coming from the Kusa-nin was just too potent. Sasuke felt sick...he felt so very sick.

Because there was something too familiar about this Killing Intent—it shouldn't have been, but it was. Why!!
"Huurk!" Sasuke retched, the contents of his stomach emptying themselves onto the ground. He shivered, his heart pounding so fast and hard within his chest, he almost felt as if it could explode at any given second. The air was so heavy, that he could barely breathe.

Swallowing hard, Sasuke diverted his eyes to the side to check on Chōko. She was far off worse than he was. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Her eyes were wide, and unlike him, she was completely still, fear having rendered her paralyzed.

Just a second ago, the two of them had acted so boldly when the Kusa-nin had transformed into Naruto. Now, the tables had been completely turned and it was they who were now at the mercy of the Kusa-nin.

"Even now, you still react the same way." The Kusa-nin chuckled darkly. "I was expecting quite a lot of improvement from the both of you—but I guess I was just expecting too much."

Who are you?!

Sasuke clenched his teeth, still speechless as ever. His mind screamed, demanding an answer how it was this Kusa-nin seemed so familiar.

"I was going to offer you an Earth scroll to go along with your Heaven scroll. " The Kusa-nin pulled out an Earth scroll from his pocket and held it out for the two of them to see. "But it appears you already have your own Earth scroll. At least, I assume you do—unless that flare was for something completely different."

How long?!

This Kusa-nin had been observing them. For how long, Sasuke didn't know and his voice still refused to cooperate with him.

"No matter." the Kusa-nin said before shoving the Earth scroll down his mouth, swallowing it whole. "When this is over, only one of us will have the scrolls…and a pulse."

Someone, help!

Sasuke could feel the tears beginning to well up in the corners of his eyes. He wanted to escape—to live, but he just couldn't move his body. Maybe if he could, he could activate the seal…he could get help, but…would it arrive fast enough? Or would it just bring more unwanted attention to them?

Move, move, move, move, move!

Alarms were practically blaring through his head as Sasuke watched the Kusa-nin take one step at a time toward him and Chōko.

"I have to hand it Konoha—to have created such clever seals." The Kusa-nin smirked as he held up his right arm and pulled back his sleeve, exposing the red seal that was imprinted on skin. "If only they had been put to good use from the exact moment everyone had passed the first part of the exam, then maybe you might have just lived to see another day."

Sasuke felt his stomach churned, as he couldn't do anything but just watch as the Kusa-nin ripped off seal that was imprinted on flesh. The Kusa-nin had just ripped off his own skin, without once flinching nor crying out in pain.
"Who is this guy?!"

"If you even think about activating your seal, I will do to you what I had just done to myself." The Kusa-nin wasn't messing around when he threw the piece of flesh he had just ripped off into the nearby river. "After all, it would be rude for anyone to interrupt our reunion after so many years."

What…?

"Maybe now is a good time as any to finish what we had once started." The Kusa-nin smirked. "What do you say, Uchiha Sasuke?"

"Aahh…" was all that came out of Sasuke's mouth. There was his voice, and it sounded so helpless.

How does he know my name?!

"Truth be told, I was expecting more of a struggle from you." The Kusa-nin licked his lips with his freakishly long tongue. "After all, you are Uchiha Itachi's little brother."

"H-How…?" Sasuke managed to ask.

"Hmm?" The Kusa-nin paused for a moment. "Oh, do you still not know who I am? I would have assumed, since your friend certainly seems to recognize me. After all, it has almost been five years since that day…"

Hiss!

Sasuke's eyes widened. Somehow, without him even noticing, a giant snake had coiled its body around Chōko. This was not good… Right now, Sasuke could tell Chōko was struggling to act the way she usually did around snakes, but the fear still kept her paralyzed.

"Move, move, move..." Sasuke tried to will himself to move, his kunai shaking within his grip. He knew he could move, but it was difficult. Unless he did something now, the Kusa-nin would soon be near them and the giant snake...

"H-Help..." That voice just now...that was Chōko—and she had sounded so terrified. Sasuke hated when she sounded like that...because it was almost as if she was seconds away from death. And the thing was that this was exactly how she acted around snakes...because the last time a giant snake had coiled itself around her body was the first time she had almost died.

It's happening again!

And Sasuke couldn't do a damn thing about it because his body refused to move. There was no one to save them this time around. There was no bargain to be made, either. What was worse, it was just them two alone, with him.

The sudden realization hit Sasuke so hard, he nearly retched again. This Kusa-nin was not who he appeared. No—he wasn't even a Genin. This person...their banter...their familiarity—everything, screamed Orochimaru.

Move!

Sasuke didn't even yelp when he plunged his kunai into his thigh. All he did was dispel the genjutsu that had been set up to screw with their psyches and bring back many unwanted memories. He almost didn't catch it...he almost didn't catch the genjutsu, until he had activated his Sharingan. That thought plagued Sasuke's mind as he quickly lifted Chōko off the ground, carrying her in his arms as
he jumped into the branches high above them. He hoped that it was enough to distance the two of them from the missing-nin that had traumatized them so badly all those years ago.

*Thump!*

*Thump!*

*Thump!*

"Bleeeeeeegghhh…" Sasuke was nearly tempted to drop Chōko out of disgust when she suddenly threw up. Of course, that wouldn't have been fair for Chōko, who had gone through hell, thanks to that genjutsu and Killing Intent. Sasuke almost felt like throwing up himself when he recalled how he had nearly mistaken the genjutsu for reality. He could have hurt Chōko…he could have hurt her, had he not activated his Sharingan and caught on to the genjutsu.

"I'm sorry…I'm sorry…" Sasuke found himself frantically apologizing to Chōko. "I'm sorry…I'm sorry."

He wasn't supposed to hurt his friends. He was supposed to heal them. That was his job as this team's medic-nin.

"I'm sorry…" Sasuke could tell Chōko was struggling not to cry as he held her close to himself. He wanted to cry…he wanted to cry *so* badly, but he couldn't because he had to stay strong. He had to stay strong for all of them.

*Where's Naruto?*

Sasuke was growing paranoid with each passing second the knuckleheaded blond was absent. He had almost forgotten that he still had a kunai sticking out of his thigh. He carefully set Chōko down onto the branch they were on and took the time to pull the kunai in his thigh. Sasuke swore under his breath, the pain finally deciding to register itself fully. Quickly, he used the Mystical Palm Jutsu to heal his leg.

As he healed his leg, Sasuke paid close attention to his surroundings. He listened carefully, trying his best to look past his and Chōko's frantic heartbeats for anything that sounded out of place. When he noticed a sudden change in Chōko's breathing and pulse, Sasuke stopped healing himself and quickly grabbed onto her hand. He managed to drag the two of them away from the giant snake that had almost chomped down on them with its huge mouth and sharp fangs. That time—that snake was *real*.

This was bad…this so very bad. Prolonged exposure around snakes was definitely not good for Chōko's mental health. Of course, Sasuke wasn't doing so well, either, and he was struggling to keep calm. He had to.

And yet, shortly after Sasuke and Chōko had landed on a nearby branch, any thoughts of staying calm went out the window when Sasuke had noticed that the snake was still going after them. He screamed and pulled out as many shuriken as his hands could hold out of his holster, throwing them all at the snake that lunged at them.

"Stay away!" The fear and desperation was evident in Sasuke's voice. He had tried…he really had, but just now, he had reached his limits. Sasuke just couldn't stay calm anymore. Not even the sight that his shuriken had hit the snake eased his nerves.

The snake recoiled violently, its head collapsing onto a branch where it then began to bleed out. Sasuke wasn't even allowed a moment to relax as the snake's skin began to break apart and peel
back. From out of the snake's corpse, came out Orochimaru, his body hunched over almost unnaturally.

"You guys shouldn't relax for even a moment." Orochimaru was almost admonishing them. "Prey should always be trying their best to run away…in the presence of a predator, that is."

Orochimaru suddenly lunged forward, his body coiling and stretching, almost as if he had been a snake. It was like something out of a nightmare—a nightmare that no one could wake up from. And just before Orochimaru could even reach them, a wave of shuriken and kunai interrupted him.

Sasuke had never felt so relieved, especially since it was Naruto, of all people, who had thrown those shuriken and kunai. Naruto grinned widely as he stood on a distant branch, crossing his arms as he loudly yelled, "Not on my watch, dattebayo!"

"N-Naruto!" Chōko exclaimed.

"What took you so long?" Sasuke found himself shouting, almost in anger. He had been so concerned…

"I got eaten by a snake-ttebayo." Naruto made a face. "It was seriously gross—but that's not important. Now who the hell is that guy?!

Orochimaru chuckled darkly. "Have you forgotten as well? I would have figured you, of all people, would remember my snakes."

Naruto's eyes widened. "You! What are you doing here, dattebayo?! And why do you look different?!"

That was a question that Sasuke had been wondering himself, but didn't have much time to really contemplate on it, as he had been too busy keeping himself and Chōko out of trouble.

Orochimaru ran his tongue over his mouth, smirking afterwards. "Stealing the face of this body was easy. Poor bastard was drunk out of his mind."

It took Sasuke a couple of seconds to realize that last night's party had some rather mortal consequences for some of those who had been attending. "M-My bad…"

"It's not your fault…" Chōko tried to reassure him, but she was just as shaken up as he was. "Really, it's not…"

"As for why I am here…I have felt the need to finish some business we had started all those years ago." Orochimaru pulled back on the sleeve covering his left arm, exposing a strange tattoo on his wrist that had been hidden under the cloth. He bit down on his thumb and then smeared the blood over the tattoo on his wrist. "You three have caused me so much trouble, that I am at a loss at what to do with you. Should I let you live, or…should I kill you?"

"Shut up!" Naruto yelled as he ran recklessly towards Orochimaru, armed with only a kunai. "I'm not letting you hurt my friends again, dattebayo!"

As reckless as Naruto was acting, Sasuke couldn't help but feel envious. Naruto was probably scared, and yet…he didn't let fear control his actions.

*I'm not like this.*

Sasuke hated how he was acting. He should be helping Naruto and instead, he was just letting the
blond act alone. And yet, when he saw the gigantic snake that Orochimaru had finished summoning, Sasuke froze. He couldn't move—he couldn't leave Chōko alone, either. All he could do was watch as Naruto was knocked off the branch, the snake having used its tail to attack.

Naruto crashed through several branches before a solid, sturdy tree trunk brought him to a sudden stop. Blood came out of his mouth upon impact, consciousness soon fading afterwards. The sight of seeing Naruto's lifeless-looking body fall the way it did was horrifying, even more so when Orochimaru's snake moved closer, its eyes closely watching Naruto as he fell.

"N-Naruto!" Sasuke couldn't believe what was happening. For the second time in his life, he was going to lose Naruto, unless he did something…but what could he do?!

Just as Naruto's body neared the snake's mouth, Sasuke heard something that sounded almost like a growl. It was right after hearing the growl that Naruto suddenly sprang back to life, yelling as he slammed his foot down onto the top of the snake's mouth.

"EAT SHIT!" Naruto yelled.

Sasuke had never seen Naruto look so mad. He could practically feel the rage emanating from the blond. It was almost sickening, and yet…Sasuke couldn't help but think that Naruto was doing this all to protect his friends. Naruto was trying to protect them…

"Let me go, dattebayo!" Naruto's screams snapped Sasuke out of his thoughts.

Sasuke's eyes widened when he saw that Orochimaru had restrained Naruto, using only his long tongue. "J-Just what is he?!"

"I was wondering why such an unimportant-looking brat like you would have caused me so much trouble," Orochimaru mused as purple chakra began to glow from his fingertips, almost like fire. "Who would have thought that the hostage I picked nearly five years ago was the container of the Kyuubi? If I had known, maybe things would have turned out differently."

Then, without any warning, Orochimaru slammed his fingertips into Naruto's stomach.

"Naruto!" Sasuke screamed, his eyes widening when he saw Naruto's body go limp. He clenched his teeth when Orochimaru flung Naruto's body over his shoulder, not caring for what happened to the blond. Sasuke couldn't just let Naruto fall like that—he couldn't! "Naruto!"

Sasuke flung a kunai in Naruto's direction, hoping it did what he had intended it to do. Relief washed over him when he watched the kunai pin Naruto to a tree. Chōko could have easily done such a task, but with that giant snake out and about, she was helpless.

Trauma was nothing to laugh at. This was why the Yamanaka clan encouraged shinobi to get therapy after traumatizing missions. Chōko was only unlucky that her trauma was practically untreatable at her age—not without severely risking her health, that is.

Fortunately, for the both of them, Orochimaru decided to dismiss his summon. At the same time, this could have also meant bad luck for the two of them. Clenching his teeth, Sasuke prepared himself for anything. He could hear Chōko retching behind him, probably still recovering from her prolonged exposure around a snake. He was honestly amazed how she hadn't broken down. That was definitely a first...

"I don't think it's a good thing, though." Sasuke could tell it had taken a toll on Chōko's health. At this point, she was only still conscious from sheer willpower alone. She must have been extremely concerned for him… "It's okay, Chōko—I can handle this."
"How sweet…" Orochimaru practically mocked him. "Watching over a deadweight like her must mean that she is someone really important to you."

Sasuke did not like the sound of that. It could only mean that Orochimaru is trying to use that to his advantage…just as he had done with Naruto and Itachi.

"No—I won't let it happen again…" Sasuke only had one chance right now…and he had to make it count. He bit down on a kunai, his eyes focused on Orochimaru as he armed himself with a shuriken in one hand and four kunai in another. Then, without warning, he threw the kunai at the missing-nin.

Orochimaru dodged predictably, and that is exactly what Sasuke was going for. Sasuke latched onto a nearby tree, using it as leverage as he threw the shuriken in his hand left hand at Orochimaru, all whilst swing his entire body at least once around the tree. Before he had made a full circle around the tree, Sasuke had been able to see Orochimaru jump over the shuriken.

"I can't screw up now!" Sasuke carefully took out the kunai in his mouth, taking a moment to infuse it with chakra to give it the extra force he needed when he threw it.

For a third time, Orochimaru dodged. He seemed rather overconfident that Sasuke's attacks kept missing…to the point he had not been able to see the wire that had been tied onto the kunai until after it had passed by his head. From there, Orochimaru could see the wires that were just over his shoulders that weren't there before. He traced the wires back to Sasuke, noticing the Uchiha was clenching his teeth down tightly on one end of the wire, the other end currently tied onto the kunai that had just been recently thrown.

When Orochimaru looked over his shoulders, Sasuke almost felt like smirking when he heard the Sannin exclaim, "This is…the Sharingan Windmill Triple Attack!"

Sasuke felt slightly sick to his stomach when he thought the shuriken embedded itself into Orochimaru's face. Then Orochimaru turned his head and showed that he had caught with his teeth.

"Hehe…too bad," Orochimaru taunted.

Of course, Sasuke still had a few tricks up his sleeve. Orochimaru didn't notice that until after the flames from Sasuke's Dragon Fire Jutsu were traveling down the metal wire. It was one surprise attack after another. And when the flames from the attack had set Orochimaru's face on fire, Sasuke released the wire in his mouth, his jaw feeling somewhat sore from how hard he had bitten down. He shuddered when he heard Orochimaru scream in pain, the flames burning his face.

"Or rather, the face that he stole…" Sasuke panted heavily as he watched Orochimaru burn. His breath hitched when Orochimaru continued to move, even after the flames finally stopped burning.

"To be able to use the Sharingan so well at this age…" Orochimaru mused. "You truly are the man that carries the Uchiha blood."

Sasuke hated whenever someone spoke of him like that. It just reminded him of the countless times the council had tried to set him up with someone, because he was the last of his clan still living in Konoha. He hated the council…he just wanted to live his life, not worrying about his status as the last Uchiha. Instead, he had to worry about the council trying to set him up with his own friends.

So far, Chōko was the only girl they had suggested, but Kakashi had shot it down almost instantly, with a little help from Chōza when he heard his daughter was being used for such an occasion. Sasuke worried of the day the council would try again with someone like Hinata. Knowing them, they would want to see what exactly the outcome would be if a Sharingan user and a Byakugan user...
were to have offspring.

"Fucking bastards…" Sasuke was terrified.

"Just as I thought…" Orochimaru smirked as burnt skin began to peel, exposing even paler skin underneath. "I want you."

At that moment, Sasuke felt something wrap around his neck. When he looked to his side, he saw that Chōko had given him her scarf. She smiled weakly at him as she continued to wrap her scarf around his neck. Sasuke had no idea what this would achieve, but it did help in easing his nerves.

"I had fun testing your powers." Orochimaru placed a hand to the hitai-ate he wore. At that moment, Sasuke felt as though he couldn't move. "You really are brothers. I sense power in your eyes that surpasses Itachi."

Sasuke felt sick upon hearing that. Even though he wanted to ask what happened to his brother, the fact that Orochimaru had been testing him just terrified him. Is that why Orochimaru had attacked Sasuke and his friends?

"If you wish to see me again...then survive and pass this exam." Orochimaru chuckled darkly before pulling out the Earth scroll he had swallowed earlier. "And of course, defeat my men, the Oto-nin trio."

"Go to hell!" Sasuke never wanted to see this man again... ever! "We were better off without you in our lives!"

Because of this bastard, Itachi had to leave...

"Now that won't do..." Orochimaru's hands formed into a seal. Almost instantly, his neck started to extend itself, almost like a snake, with his head lunging towards Sasuke, fangs bared. It was almost as if Orochimaru had intended to bite Sasuke.

Sasuke wanted to move out of the way...but he couldn't. He was sure that Chōko was the same, since her hands were still gripping the fabric of the scarf she had wrapped snugly around his neck. And yet, it was that same scarf that had gotten in the way of Orochimaru's teeth when he had tried biting down on Sasuke's neck.

Clang!

Teeth had met with metal and it took Sasuke until then to have realized that Chōko no longer had her hitai-ate around her neck. When she had placed her scarf around his neck, she had also given him her hitai-ate. They had gotten so lucky with the placement...

"Ever since that snake got on my neck...I never liked exposing my neck." Chōko always made it a habit to cover her neck unless otherwise...why she had done it, Sasuke never really knew the answer until now. "I always thought, what if something tried to bite me on the neck...and then I got to thinking, just now...what if he tried to bite you."

Never before had Sasuke felt so grateful for Chōko's random thoughts. He had nearly gotten bitten, had it not been for her.

"Thank you..." Sasuke found himself saying, even though he should have saved it for when after they were no longer in danger.

Orochimaru was not pleased with the results, looking rather annoyed with Chōko's actions. Sasuke
was worried he was going to bite her instead of him, since her neck was now completely exposed.

"You have been a thorn in my side since we have first met." Orochimaru began as his head returned back to his body, neck no longer extended as it had been previously. "Even now, you still managed to get in my way. Truth be told—I am quite impressed with what you have become since our first meeting."

Sasuke's breath hitched when Orochimaru suddenly appeared so close to him and Chōko. The Sannin's attention was still only focused on Chōko.

"A D-rank in the Bingo Books, known as the Butterfly of Doom…" Orochimaru continued. "You have certainly made a name for yourself when you decided to punch me in that specific location that day…I had been ridiculed for it, as well. I should return the favor while I am at it—especially since you decided to get in the way of the little gift I wanted to give Sasuke."

**THUD!**

Sasuke's eyes widened as he watched Chōko's unconscious body fall onto the branch they were standing on, just mere seconds after Orochimaru had knocked her out.

"I prefer to keep someone like her quiet for what I have planned next." Orochimaru turned his attention to Sasuke. "Of course, if you wish to take her place, all you have to do is say the word."

"Wh-What are you going to do?" Sasuke found himself asking.

"I am going to continue from where I had left off…but on her, instead of you." Orochimaru smirked. "Since I am feeling rather nice, how about I tell you about the one in ten survival rate that comes with my gift?"

"One in ten?" Sasuke didn't like the sound of that.

"I am quite sure someone like you would survive it without any problems, but her…" Orochimaru chuckled darkly as he knelt down by Chōko's side. "Well, let's just see if she is lucky or not—"

"Wait!" Sasuke exclaimed. "I'll—!"

"You'll, what?" Orochimaru looked expectantly at Sasuke.

Sasuke clenched his teeth. If he went through with what Orochimaru was offering, he was only going to render the actions Chōko had done to keep him from getting bitten to be for naught. And yet, if he didn't do anything, Orochimaru would bite Chōko instead…and according to Orochimaru, there was only a ten percent chance she would survive.

…

…

"Just leave her alone…" Sasuke was done losing people. He couldn't risk it…not even for a moment. "I'm sorry, Chōko…"

"It seems I have chosen well." Orochimaru sounded too damn smug for Sasuke's liking.

*But it's all for a good cause…right?*

Sasuke screwed his eyes shut when he felt Orochimaru start to pull off the scarf wrapped around his neck. When he felt the air come in contact with his skin, he shuddered. He could finally understand
the awkwardness that Chōko felt whenever she had her neck completely exposed.

"It's now or never..." Sasuke clenched his teeth as he waited for the sharp fangs that would clamp down on his skin...

But they never came.

Instead, Sasuke's ears were greeted with the pained screams of what appeared to be a girl. His heart practically stopped when he recognized the voice. When he opened his eyes, Sasuke felt his blood run cold. It had never occurred to him, as he kept his eyes closed, that someone could have come across him and Chōko, in their current predicament. It had also never occurred to him that someone could have used the Kawarimi, using him as the replacement in order to take his place when Orochimaru decided to bite down.

So when Sasuke saw that it was Team Yamato's Haruno Sakura that had taken his place, he was horrified. He was horrified at the thought of losing Sakura to the ninety percent chance of death that came with Orochimaru's bite. It hurt to hear the pained screams that came after Orochimaru had bitten down.

And when Sakura's teammates had arrived to the scene, with Kusagakure's Karin at their side, Sasuke couldn't even begin to explain what had just happened. All he could do was watch as Sakura continued to scream, her hands pressed over the bite that Orochimaru had given her on her neck.

"S-Sakura!" Sasuke yelled as Sai helped him stand up. Why did he need help standing up?!

"Kanashibari no Jutsu..." was all Sai told Sasuke before turning to look at Sakura.

"What happened here?" Haku asked as he armed himself with senbon.

"I told you someone was following them!" Karin huffed as she activated the seal on the upper part of her left arm, sending a red flare up into the sky. "My team is going to be so pissed at me for doing that, but fuck them! I don't even want to stay in Kusagakure—I want to move here!"

"What the hell?!" Sasuke was confused.

"You know how I'm a sensor?" Karin asked Sasuke. "I've been keeping an eye on all of you rather closely...and when I noticed something was off when it came to your group, I sorta ditched my team to go get these guys."

"We thought she might have been trying to lead us back to her team in order to battle for our scroll..." Haku looked rather embarrassed. "I mean, she had an Earth scroll on her and our team was given a Heaven scroll..."

"Why did Deko do that?" Sai looked rather confused.

Really, why exactly did Sakura take his place like that? Sasuke couldn't even begin to think of a reason. For now, he was just glad that Orochimaru had finally let them be, since Karin had decided to activate her seal. Orochimaru wasn't even given a chance to take in the sudden change in situation.

With Orochimaru gone, Sasuke was no longer paralyzed. He rushed over to Sakura's side, his heart pounding as he continued to hear her scream. He hesitated to touch her, tears welling up in the corners of his eyes as he watched her writhe in pain.

"Wh-Why?" Sasuke was supposed to have gotten bit, not Sakura... "Why did you do this?"
There was a ninety percent chance that she was going to die!

"Please don't die…don't die!" Tears streamed down Sasuke's cheeks as he held Sakura closely to his chest, her hand tightly gripping his. "Don't die…don't die…"

Why was this happening? Why?!

"Don't die…" Sasuke sniffed as he saw a mark appear where Sakura had been bitten. The mark was black in color and consisted of three tomoe. Was that what was supposed to be on his neck? "Don't die…"

When Sasuke noticed the Earth scroll that Orochimaru had left behind, he was almost tempted to burn it, but he refrained from doing so. He had to stay calm…he just had to. He was so glad that Karin, Haku, and Sai were around. He was really glad when Karin had been the one to bring Naruto down. He was just so relieved to see Haku checking Chōko over, confirming that she was completely fine, just unconscious.

"Is Deko okay?" Sai asked, despite being able to see and hear that Sakura was still screaming in pain.

Sasuke was almost tempted to snap at Sai, but stopped himself when he realized Sai looked so concerned. If Chōko was still conscious, she would have probably smacked a sticker onto Sai's hitaiate…as soon as it was appropriate, that is. Right now, Sakura wasn't doing so well and Sasuke was just so worried that she could die.

It was supposed to be me—not her!

Sasuke choked back a sob when Haku told him they had to leave. Karin told them that she could sense shinobi coming their way, most likely trying to take advantage of the confrontation that had already occurred here. Before they had left, Karin had handed Sai her Earth scroll.

"There's not much use it has for me now." Karin tried to lighten up the situation, but it was already grim as is. "Be careful, the sun's starting to set."

And with darkness, came even more danger. Sasuke was not looking forward to the long night he was going to spend with Team Yamato. With two of his teammates, plus the only skilled medic-nin, currently incapacitated, Sasuke had no other choice but to team up with Haku and Sai. Not that he had any problems with that, of course, he was quite used to them as housemates and very much appreciate the help they gave him. He was just…very depressed that it had to come to this.

"I am so sorry…" Sasuke told Haku and Sai as he hefted Sakura onto his back. She had finally stopped screaming, though she was still very much in pain.

"She chose to take your place—just focus on trying to keep her safe now." Haku was just as concerned as Sasuke.

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…

That night, after Sasuke, Haku, and Sai had found a place to settle down under the large roots of a tree, Uchiha Sasuke cried for the first time that day. It was while he was placing a damp towel on Sakura's forehead (the pink-haired girl having developed a fever over the night), that Sasuke had finally lost his composure. The entire time, he had been trying his hardest to stay calm, but now…he had reached his limit.
He was only lucky that he wasn't alone, because Sasuke wasn't sure how he would have reacted, had Haku and Sai not been there with him. Naruto and Chōko had yet to wake up. Haku and Sai were keeping a vigilant eye while Sasuke continued to watch Sakura for any signs of improvement. So far, she had only gotten worse, her breathing having grown erratic…but she was still alive.

"She's still alive..." Sasuke could cope with that. He could very much cope with that.

"We're still alive..."

Chapter End Notes

So did you guys know that if a Sharingan user and a Byakugan user mated, their offspring would have one Byakugan and one Sharingan? Well, now you know!

That aside, wow, look at how long this chapter is! And by the by, this was Sasuke's first POV chapter! Yeah, he's quite different than I'd expected him to be. Of course, it was only appropriate that he got the POV, considering what happens in the Forest of Death. Still, what was supposed to happen didn't because deviations occurred. First, it was Chōko actually trying to be a direct change, while the true cause of divergence was Sakura, who had taken Sasuke's place. You guys have Karin to thank for this and while she wasn't with everyone else when they were bonding before they entered the Forest of Death, she still does care for her friends/acquaintances. Even if she's only known them for a short time, the fact that they have been so friendly to her has left a huge impression on her.

A reviewer has brought up how easily some of these characters become friends. It kinda does feel a bit like wish-fulfillment, but one of the things I was hoping this would show is that, unlike the adults, the younger shinobi are more willing to let go of the past and create new bonds. They might have been encouraged by their Kage (like the Iwa and Kumo teams) to befriend the others, but what actually happened is that they managed to get along so well with them.

Anyways, last night's party is hinted throughout this chapter, Temari got contracted with the weasel summon, Kankurō stole a chicken and named it Clucky—speaking of Clucky, ChibiFoxAI and I didn't exactly notice the name until AFTER I pointed it out. We had almost forgotten about Naruto the Abridged series and Clucky was just a name that was put up that sounded like something Kankurō would give a chicken, so yeah... It's pretty hilarious how that ended up happening. XD

By the by, in case anyone was wondering what happened last night, ChibiFoxAI has a one-shot post up on her account. She has been waiting since December for that one-shot, in case any of you guys are wondering. The two of us have anticipated it, so please do take the time to check it out. Credit goes to her for the idea of the flare seals, in case anyone is wondering! It was her brilliant mind that had created them! ^^

So as of recently, I've noticed some reviewers making mention of how "weak" or "useless" Chōko is for not having anything special. Now I kinda want to correct this and say that whenever I bring up the fact that Chōko punched Orochimaru in the crotch, it shouldn't be taken lightly. Because when she was eight years old, she had managed to hurt an S-ranked missing-nin who usually gives many people a hard time. People who
are known to have even touched Orochimaru are Itachi and the Sandaime Hokage…and Sasuke, but only for a brief moment and he had the Sharingan to help him.

Chōko had none of that and again, she was only eight, younger than anyone who had ever been up against Orochimaru. And she had managed to not only punch him in the crotch, but she also managed to land a Teppōdama on him, which has been known to crack ribs when she was only eight. So again, do you really want Chōko to gain any special abilities to make her less ordinary? Just think about it.

A HUGE thank you goes to the reviewers who defended Chōko and like her the way she is! Also, keep in mind that when I speak of reviewers, I am referring to the Fanfiction.net reviewers. I used comments to refer to this site. Anyways, I suggest you look up ChibiFoxAI on that site for the one-shot.

I hope you guys enjoyed this super long chapter! POV may or may not shift back come next chapter (I'm still debating it), but hopefully, I get it up as soon as I can. Until next time, everyone!
3-31-18 IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT: Hey y'all, it's been like three years and I want to apologize for not keeping up with this fic. But just know that I haven't given up on this fic! It's just on hiatus, but that might change this year! I just went through ALL 41 chapters and edited them out, so some things have been added in and whatnot and I'd REALLY recommend it if people would re-read this story.

With that out of the way, do try to be patient! I wanted to get through ALL these chapters and fixed them up a bit before continuing this story and now that I've managed with that...let's just see how productive I can be this year! ^^

Thank you all so much for supporting this story and as a reminder, Butterfly Child DOES have a tvtropes page and there is now a strawpoll for the shipping games!!

Feel free to contribute to either (and by that, I mean please DO add to the tvtropes page, since not much has been changed since its creation).

With that out of the way, read on! Let's hope for the best this year! ^^

Have you ever had one of those nightmares where you felt like you couldn't wake up from it, no matter what you did? That's how I felt throughout the entire encounter with Orochimaru. Even worse, I wanted to do something, but all I could do was nothing—just watch as things happened. It was so annoying, that I just wanted to slap myself, but I couldn't even do that.

When I woke up, I was at a loss at what to think. So many things happened. I didn't even know where I was or if everything was okay—I doubt it would be. It didn't help that I woke up from a rather intense nightmare. I was so on edge that I nearly punched Sasuke in the face when he checked up on me, which would have been a bad idea because he was literally the only medic-nin on us at this point, as I quickly found out afterward. My adrenaline was pumping, even though the danger had already passed…for the moment.

It probably didn't help that it was really dark outside. The sun had long set and, as a precaution, we were using the darkness to our advantage to stay out of sight. It was sometime past midnight, according to Haku, and every little brush I felt on my skin made me jump. I never liked the dark. I had an off-and-on fear with it. Sometimes, I liked the dark, other times, I was afraid of it. I was mostly afraid what could be hiding in the darkness—especially in such a location as the Forest of Death.

Once I managed to calm down a bit, I was able to get some answers and…I wasn't feeling so well to hear that, while Sasuke managed to have avoid getting bitten, Sakura wasn't as lucky. She had taken Sasuke's place instead and just...we're all afraid that she won't be able to make it. I'm honestly glad it
was as dark as it was, because I don't think I could have handled seeing Sakura's face right now.

I should be happy that Sasuke didn't get the cursed mark—really, I should. But I don't like this outcome, because there was no way that any of us knew if Sakura was going to live or not. Maybe if I had actually done something instead of doing nothing, this wouldn't have happened.

*I'm so fucking useless…*

I wanted to cry…I wanted to cry so badly, but I just held it in. I don't deserve to cry…that's how I felt right now. I could have done something. Could it have turned out better? I don't think so, but I at least would have tried.

*Useless…*

Why couldn't I move? I didn't break down, so why couldn't I move?! Why? It was just a fucking snake!

*A giant snake that could have easily crushed you like the weak prey you are.*

Everything was fine until that fucking genjutsu brought back all those bad memories. I had never felt so scared—but it wasn't real! The snake Orochimaru summoned was, but the genjutsu wasn't—why did it work so well?! Why?!

*Why am I so weak?!*

I am so lucky that things still managed to go according to canon, to a certain extent. So many things could have still gone wrong, though. Naruto would have gotten eaten. Sasuke could have missed. We all could have died…

And my hitai-ate could have not been in the right place at the right time. I was almost sure that wasn't going to work, but I did it anyways—just as a precaution. I was hoping the fabric of my scarf would have made it difficult for Orochimaru's fangs to easily puncture Sasuke's neck… That's why I wrapped it around Sasuke's neck so many times.

I just wanted to stall for time…that's all I ever wanted. I never meant for Sakura to get involved like this. I never meant for anyone to have gotten bitten. If I had done something as well, maybe Karin and Team Yamato would have gotten to us before Orochimaru could even try to bite Sasuke.

If I had done something, maybe Orochimaru could have gotten caught in the act by the ANBU that Anko had requested for in order to track down the Sannin's scaly ass. Maybe Anko could have saved us. There were so many possibilities, time all crucial to them.

It worked out so well last time…

*But it wasn't just the three of you, then.*

I still did something… I was only eight years old and I still managed to fight back when I could. Sure, Orochimaru broke my ankle, but I at least did it, with the knowledge that I had done him some harm to him, apart from punching him in the crotch (I was aiming for his stomach, but I was too short). To be honest, I could have died then…and I was really lucky that Iruka arrived when he did.

Hell—it was even more dangerous then, than it was now, because Sasori was there! Sasori had already demonstrated how deadly his poison was when he had attacked Hound! We could have easily gotten poisoned as well, but we didn't. I wasn't even aware of my recently developed phobia
of snakes until after the incident.

So why am I so caught up in comparing what I did when I was eight years old to what happened earlier? Is it the idea that an Academy student who had no weapons whatsoever and was completely unprepared for what had happened, still managed to do more than a Genin who was armed, knew more techniques, and was better prepared for the situation?

It certainly feels like it… It's depressing when you think of it that way—that I managed to hold my ground better when I was much younger and much inexperienced. If I wasn't afraid of snakes, then maybe—just maybe…

_Sakura wouldn't have gotten bit._

Her breathing was really starting to freak me out. I was afraid that she would suddenly stop—that she would just die. I don't want her to die…I want her to live.

_I want everyone to live._

How is everyone supposed to live if I can't even protect my friends from the deviations that could potentially kill them?! Oh god, how am I supposed to even prevent Neji's death at this rate?! I haven't even thought about it once—just acknowledged it briefly for the sake of enjoying that Neji was (and is) still alive right now…

_What am I even doing?!_

Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't _cry_.

_Don't cry._

It felt like I couldn't breathe—that everything was just going to fall apart right now. Or maybe it already has... My heart was pounding so hard within my chest. My body was shaking so badly and the thought that things could get better just escaped my mind. There was just so much negativity going through my head that it was almost suffocating.

I grabbed at my hair, tugging down on it as I tried not to cry. I curled up in a tight ball onto the ground, just hoping to stay completely undetected. The darkness has never felt so welcoming—so safe. No one could see me right now. At least, I hoped no one could see me.

_What do I do? _

Don't look at me!

_Please don't look at me!_

_Please._

_I'm fine._

_I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine._

_FINE FINE FINE FINE FINE FINE FINE_!

_I deserve to feel like this!_
This is all **my** fault!

For being useless!

**Useless useless useless!**

*If anyone deserves to get bitten, it should be me!*

**Why why why why why why why?!**

**WHY WASN’T IT ME?!**

Why...?

Nonononononononono! Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry—stopstopstopstop!

**STOP!**

"Ah..." Nonono—don't talk, don't talk! "Aahhh..."

*Shut up, shut up, shut up!*

*Shutupshutupshutup!*

**They'll hear you.**

"Mm..." Stay quiet, don't bring them into it—this is your problem, not theirs. Your issues aren't as bad as theirs are. You're not the one whose life is in danger!

**You're not Sakura!**

You're not the one who took Sasuke's place. You're not the one currently suffering from Orochimaru's bite. You're not the one permanently scarred by his mark. You're not the one whose future is at risk!

**You're Chōko.**

You're just normal, plain Chōko...who stands out so painfully amongst her family—who doesn't fit in, but manages. Who tries to ignore how much she looks like Chōji when he ingests the last of the three-colored pills—when he's so thin and so frail, because of the damage those pills had caused his body.

**You can't even use them...because your body is so fucked up.**

No one can even understand how an Akimichi with a fast-metabolism came to be—or how differently it works, when anyone else could have been living a relatively normal life. But not Akimichi Chōko—she's an anomaly.

**You're not even supposed to exist.**

Why her, when anyone else could have been born instead?

**Why me?**

No matter how hard she tries, letting go of the past is so difficult. To try and live in the moment as a way to ignore how afraid she is to even exist in such a world. To know that she will never see the
people she had left behind ever again…

I want to go home…

¡Mami, Papi—ayúdame!

To struggle with the knowledge that she isn't supposed to exist—but somehow, still does.

I'mscaredI'mscaredI'mscared!

To know that the girl who once existed before is dead…and accept that Akimichi Chōko is who she is now.

Helphelphelphelp!

"Uuuu…" Quiet, quiet, quiet! "Uuuu…"

Someone—anyone—help me!

"Are you okay?" And just like that, everything suddenly went so quiet.

I was still struggling to breathe, the tears weren't stopping, but I could acknowledge that someone was talking to me. My mind screamed at me to answer, but I just couldn't find my voice.

Say something!

"What's wrong?" Still the same person, but I didn't know whom—I couldn't think straight, just that I had to respond.

Please don't leave me!

"Meganekko?" Sai…ah, I see—wait, why him? How did he notice?

Why ask? Say something before he leaves!

"Fine…" Nonononono—whyareyoulying?!

Don't go, don't go!

"Chōko…don't lie." Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Thank you for noticing, Haku!

"S-Sorry…hic!" I don't think I can stay quiet anymore…"I'm sorry…"

Sorrysorrysorrysorry!

"Stop…just stop." What's wrong, Sasuke? "Stop apologizing."

Did I do something wrong? Is it because I'm crying?

"Why are you even apologizing?" Sasuke sounded so annoyed. "What happened, happened—don't even think it's your fault for even a second. Because it's not…it's no one's fault."

"Is that why Meganekko is crying?" Sai was probably confused…and yet, he seemed to have noticed what was going on when he asked, "Because she thinks it's her fault?"
"Chōko…" Sasuke suddenly said.

"Hmm…?" I exhaled shakily. I was so close to breaking down, but I couldn't—I just couldn't.

\[\text{Not now—\textit{not here.}}\]

"Why do you think it's your fault?" I was confused why Sasuke sounded so scared. "Why do you think it's your fault…when it's mine?"

I had never expected Sasuke to say something like that. "Wha?"

"It's no one's fault…but mine…" Sasuke sounded so defeated when he said that. "If I wasn't so scared…"

\[\text{I was scared, too…}\]

"If I had just moved…" Sasuke, are you crying?

\[\text{I didn't move either.}\]

"And now, Sakura is suffering because she got bit instead of me." Don't cry—please don't cry, Sasuke! "It should have been me, not her!"

\[\text{Nonononono—why are you saying something like that?!}\]

"Naruto hasn't woken up, Sakura has a fever, and you're blaming yourself for something that's really my fault…" Sasuke…please don't blame yourself!

\[\text{Please…stop acting like me!}\]

When Haku had conjured up a concentrated ball of light using a simple illumination technique in order to provide some sort of lighting, my first reaction was to jolt out of my position. I didn't want anyone seeing me curled up in a little ball, like a child who had a bad nightmare. My vision blurred momentarily, my eyes having grown so used to the darkness that the light almost \textit{hurt}. Once my eyes had adjusted to the current lighting, I was able to see everyone's faces.

Haku looked so concerned and Sai…he was so confused. He probably had no idea what was going on right now and with how out of touch with his emotions he currently was, I don't think he recognized the fear that sometimes came with concern. And then there was Sasuke…here, I was, beating myself up for what had happened, and yet, Sasuke was doing the exact same thing.

\[\text{Why are we doing this to ourselves?}\]

Sasuke was hunched over, his body shaking as he continued to look over Sakura, who was breathing so irregularly. Tear drops were splashing onto her forehead every few seconds or so as they fell from his face.

"This is my fault…" Sasuke said as he placed a folded towel on Sakura's forehead. "This is all my fault…"

\[\text{Stop…}\]
I swallowed hard, barely choking back a sob when I started to crawl towards Sasuke.

"Please don't die…" Sasuke looked so scared. "Please stop crying…it's not your fault."

Stop it!

I hesitated to reach out to Sasuke, my hand shaking as it neared the fabric of Sasuke's blue shirt. Does Sasuke even know I'm near him? Should I even touch him when he's like this? He doesn't like being touched, but…

I can't leave him alone!

"Sasuke!" I'm sorry if this makes you feel uncomfortable, is what I thought as I wrapped my arms around Sasuke's waist. I could feel him stiffen, my touch most likely registered as unwanted for Sasuke. I wanted to let go, but I couldn't… And when I felt his body begin to shake, I tightened my embrace.

We shouldn't be like this.

"It's no one's fault…not yours nor mine," I managed to say before Sasuke started crying. Not long after, I started to do the same. It was as though we were finally releasing everything we had bottled up—at least, that's how it felt for me.

It wasn't exactly the smartest thing to do—to be as loud as we were, but Haku and Sai weren't saying anything. They just watched as Sasuke and I continued to cry. I think I heard Sai asking Haku why Sasuke was crying again.

I'm guessing Sasuke had cried while I was still unconscious, though it was probably for the wrong reasons. Unlike me, I would say that Sasuke wasn't capable of holding down such strong emotions in regards to feeling so at fault for everything that had happened. For us to even blame ourselves, it's not healthy…so why do we do it?

I don't know...

But it does reveal issues that exist…issues that I—we have. We were scared…and for Sasuke and I, to be in a situation so similar to the past in some ways… It shows how much Orochimaru has affected us and for Sakura to have gotten involved… It just feels wrong.

Even though we should be concerned about Naruto, we're not. We're more concerned about Sakura, because she could die. Naruto, on the other hand, is blissfully unaware of what is going on as he continues to remain unconscious. He's not in danger of dying…but Sakura is and Sakura shouldn't have even been part of this situation.

And yet, she managed to be the deviation that I could have never expected. It just comes to show that these deviations are out of my control… Which is something I should acknowledge. It's difficult, but sometimes…things just happen.

And there's nothing I can do about it…

It's frustrating, but…that's how life is sometimes. And maybe, the reason why we blame ourselves…the reason I blame myself…is because I like to think I'm in control of some of these deviations, when I'm not (like hell). Instead, most of these things are in the workings with little technicalities that are almost trivial, which end up having a bigger impact later in life.

Like the friendship between Gaara and Naruto…or my mere existence causing Sakura to end up in a
different class because of an alphabetical order of names, my status as Chōji's twin sister, and the fact that I came from a rather well-known clan. Basically, shit that I had no hand in affecting directly. From there, things started to go differently than they did in canon and it's pretty much the reason why we don't have a pink-haired Sasuke fangirl in a heated rivalry with Ino.

I still don't understand why Sakura would choose to take Sasuke's place, when she could have done something completely different, but...people do crazy things when they're in the moment. And as much as I wanted to be mad at her for risking her life, because I really don't want her to die, I'm...grateful she for what she has done. It's a conflicting feeling.

And Orochimaru...I'm done letting him make us feel that way—make us feel that our fear made us weak. Made us feel that it was our fault that we couldn't do anything, when he was deliberately messing with our heads. We were just unlucky...but I want to make sure it never happens again.

Never, ever again...

If it means getting over my fear of snakes—then I'm game. I'm just done with Orochimaru making us feel like this.

I'm...not useless.

I'm not. I'm just Akimichi Chōko...and I just want everyone to live.

So please don't die, Sakura...

Please?

...

...

When I woke up, I had a near freak out because I woke up. I fell asleep...like, holy shit, what happened while I was out?! When did I fall asleep? The sun is up and IS SAKURA STILL ALIVE?!

"She's still alive—her breathing's gotten better." Thank you, Haku, for the update—why isn't Sasuke watching over Sakura?! "Sasuke-kun is still asleep..."

I blinked a few times and looked at my side. Sure enough, there was Sasuke's fuzzy blue figure—okay, where are my glasses?

"Sorry, Meganekko," Sai said as he handed me my glasses. "I didn't think you would feel comfortable sleeping with them on."

If it didn't feel so out of place and if I hadn't forgotten my packets of stickers, I would have smacked a sticker on Sai's hitai-ate right now. "Thank you."

Welcome back, beautiful vision!

"Naruto-kun hasn't woken up yet, but nothing seems too out of the ordinary with him." I'm jealous with how composed Haku is...then again, he should be used to crap like this. I mean, Zabuza did raise Haku.

...

"What's the longest you've stayed awake?" I'm hoping Sai also answers this question as well.
Haku paused to think for a moment before saying, "A week…Zabuza-sama told me if I didn't go to sleep, he would knock me out himself."

Is that seriously what it's like to have a Kirigakure missing-nin as a father? Wait… "Why were you awake for that long?"

"It was when we were leaving Kirigakure." Ahh, that explains a lot… "I…might have overthought the situation."

I don't blame him…I mean, Haku wasn't exactly in the best position to be in Kirigakure. It still is a bad place for him to be in, even with Mei's progressive attitude. "What about you, Sai?"

"Eleven…?" Is that an answer or a question? "I can't exactly recall."

…

OH, fuck you, Danzō—you pushed him past his limits, didn't you?!

When is he gonna die?

I seriously wanna rip Shisui's eye out from Danzō's socket, now—whoa, calm down, Chōko! Yeesh, I don't think this what a person my age should even be thinking about…but fuck it, I'm a kunoichi and it's Danzō. He's the reason Shisui is dead, when that beautiful bastard promised us he wouldn't die…I wanted him to live.

I'm still not too sure what went down during the Uchiha Clan Massacre—all I know is that Itachi is innocent. Still, I do have a feeling that, had a deviation not occurred, Itachi would have ended up leaving the village for the same reasons he did in canon. With the way he acted throughout the summer festival before we made that gruesome discovery at the Uchiha compound, Itachi was most definitely trying to make the most of his last days in Konoha. All those pictures…that's just sad.

"Hey, a squirrel!" You know, I try not to fall into stereotypical ADHD behavior, but god dammit, are squirrels ever so distracting— "Holy shit, Haku!"

What the fridge was that about?! Why are you trying to kill a squirrel?!

"What happened?!" Oops, woke up Sasuke…

"There's an explosive tag on its back…" Haku said as he crawled out of our hiding spot of sorts to look around the area. He was armed and ready for anything that caught his eye. "Someone's near…"

Who could—oh…never mind. Pfft, my memory sucks sometimes. I forgot about the squirrel bomb—oh my god, is it going to be okay?!

"Don't go out…it's dangerous." Damn it, Haku, why do you have to be right?!

"But the squirrel…" I don't even like squirrels, but I don't want it to die… That tag's gonna go off on its own after enough time.

"I'm sure someone will find it and help it out." Sai…thank you for trying to cheer me up and reminding me that Lee should be around, catching leaves as they fell from the trees.

Please don't screw this up for me, deviations.

"I am so sorry that I don't have any stickers to give you," I told Sai as I patted him on the head.
"I'm fine with this." And there's that fake smile.

"Guys, seriously…what happened?" Oops, almost forgot about Sasuke. "Wait—Sakura!"

Whoa, déjà vu—Sasuke's acting the same way I did when I realized I just woke up. Probably doesn't help that I kinda woke him up with my outburst when Haku threw that senbon… It's not exactly the best way to wake up—especially if you're a shinobi. The Academy sure knew how to train us so we'd wake up to any sudden noises while we were sleeping. And it all happened during that month spent in that forest…

It was a horrible time to be an Academy student. Emotions ran wild, tension was high, and bonds were tested. Even our circle of friends didn't do so well…at first. Then Hinata accidentally sent Mizuki to the hospital and things got a little better because little Hinata sent a grown-ass Chuunin to the hospital. That was just hilarious and worth celebrating, even if Hinata felt rather guilty about it, but it was Mizuki. None of us liked Mizuki.

And, if it helps, we were supposed to retaliate to any sudden "ambushes" Chuunin instructors pulled on us at any given moment…like when we were sleeping or trying to get over the fact that the forest is creepy at night. Shikamaru was literally the only one completely calm about the entire thing, because even Shino wasn't doing so well. By the end of day two, Shikamaru had already resigned to his position of being our security blanket of sorts…

Yes, even Sasuke was clinging onto Shikamaru. Ino was so jealous…and Shikamaru was annoyed, but let it happen because we were freaking out. What a total bro…

"Still a fever…" Sasuke frowned as he felt Sakura's forehead with his hand.

"She's getting better!" I should probably be quiet, since there be Oto-nin spying on us right now, but Sasuke needed the reassurance and—

"AAAAUGHHH!" Holy shit, Haku—who did you just hit?!

"Whoever is out there, I suggest you leave us alone, or else the next senbon will be thrown with the intent to kill." Damn, Haku, you scary…also, I am totally jealous of your aim with senbon.

Though, I am rather concerned with how our encounter with Zaku, Dosu, and Kin will go come this scenario. Haku and Sai are with us, and Sasuke is awake…but Naruto is still out and our medic-nin is down—holy shit, our White Mage is down!

Crap, crap, crap!

Okay, okay…let's just hope that Haku's precise aim scares them off—nope. The Oto-nin are here and they look just as every bit ready for a confrontation. Well, damn.

"You think a little senbon is going to scare us away?" Zaku looked extremely annoyed as he pulled out a single senbon out of his hand. "It'll take more than that!"

Sai blinked a few times and smiled that fake smile of his. "You're going to get yourself killed, saying stuff like that."

Damn straight… "Really, you oughta leave—we don't need any scrolls."

"We're not here for a scroll," Dosu remarked. "We're here to fight Sasuke-kun."

Sasuke stiffened when he heard Dosu say his name. "Not…again…"
Sasuke—what's with that look on your face…?

...

Oh *hell no*—no more self-blame! "It's not your fault!"

"B-But…they're here for me…” A small bead of sweat rolled down the side of Sasuke's face.

"Just stop!" I will smack you if you keep it up! "They might be here for you, but they sure as hell are going to regret coming after you when you're with us."

"We got your back…” Haku said before standing up. "Just make sure to take care of Sakura-san and Naruto-kun."

"Don't let Deko down…” Sai said as he started to crawl out of our hiding spot. "She'll be worried when she wakes up and sees you hurt."

"O-Okay…” Sasuke was reluctant, but still did as he was told.

"Hey…hold my glasses, will you?” I smiled reassuringly at Sasuke as I handed him my glasses. Sasuke stared at me for a moment before smiling. "I will…don't get hurt. Please."

"No promises!” Oh, I am *totally* going to regret this.

...

"Wow, I heard you were rather short, but I didn't think you were *this* short!” Oh, fuck off, Zaku—only Suigetsu is allowed to poke fun at my height!

"You *are* aware that I am younger than these two boys, here, right?” I tried to stay calm as I stood in between Sai and Haku. "I doubt it since you barely know anything about them!”

Zaku tried to say something in response to my comment, but he didn't seem to have anything…probably because I was *right!* The only team Zaku, Dosu, and Kin were informed about were Team Kakashi.

"Meganekko is right, isn't she?” Sai's question really seemed to piss Zaku off.

"Shut up!” Nice come back, Zaku. "It doesn't matter—we're still going to kill you!"

Kill…just hearing that word makes my stomach churn. It just makes the situation so terrifyingly real. It's all the more reason to be more cautious—especially since these three specialize in sound techniques. Physics…I will make you my bitch if it comes to it.

*Let's do this, brain!*

"Don't attack until I say you can,” I quickly told Sai and Haku. "Just trust me on this."

"Sure thing, Meganekko!” Sai was probably smiling that fake smile of his again. Couldn't really tell, since all I can see was a black blur when it came to Sai.

"I can't make any promises, but do your best.” Haku, just trust me on this one…

"Sui*ton Mizu Deppō!”* I inhaled deeply before expelling a forceful shot of water from my mouth. Zaku, Dosu, and Kin were quick to react, jumping back to avoid my attack. Water hit the ground,
soon dampening it before turning what was dry ground into wet mud.

"You missed!" Zaku exclaimed, grinning.

I ignored him as I tried to attack them again once more. Predictably, they dodged…but this time, they split up, making it easier on me to switch from a relatively harmless attack (in comparison to the one I have planned) to an even more powerful one. "Suiton Teppōdama!"

Soon, condensed balls of water were shooting everywhere as Zaku, Dosu, and Kin continued to dodge. Each and every time a ball shot after them, they dodge, the ball soon hitting the ground. After some time, I stopped to catch my breath. When it comes to converting chakra into water, it requires quite powerful lungs depending on the technique. Oxygen is sometimes a catalyst to such a conversion. Thing about chakra is that it can manipulate physics—that's right, physics is being manipulated.

It's something I learned when I was making my own techniques, which is where I got my Mizu Deppō. Since Kakashi told me not to go to Zabuza and Haku for Suiton techniques, I decided to make my own. It's…harder than it looks. Seriously, I'm not joking.

What made it easier for me is the realization that the laws of physics, for the most part, are still a thing. It's just that chakra is literally a cheat code to working your way around it. That's how Dosu is using sound waves as an attack.

It's best not to think about it too much, considering how much of a rage-inducing activity it is to think about the science of ninjutsu (oh god, those two words should not be put together). I'm not even going to touch genjutsu—fuck that! There are just some things you're better off allowing to happen without an explanation, otherwise, you're trying to figure out how Sasuke's Sharingan works from both a biological and scientific standpoint and I'm just done for the entire year to even try to look into it.

Stop being a nerd, Chōko!

Never!

"For someone whose aim is supposed to be precise, you sure do miss a lot," Dosu remarked.

"Naaah, ya think?" Way to state the obvious, captain. "With that attitude of yours, I doubt you'll be making it far into the Chuunin exams."

"At least we don't miss, bitch!" Zaku snapped.

"Who says I missed?" Bingo, you guys fell for it. "Haku, you can attack now."

And when Haku threw an array of senbon at Dosu, Zaku, and Kin, they dodged…but I was expecting that. What I was actually anticipating was seeing the three immediately slip and fall flat on their asses after their feet touched the now muddy ground. It was never my goal to attack them.

I wanted to incapacitate them.

"Take a look around you—can you really move around this environment?" The once hard ground was now slick and muddy after coming in contact with the water from my techniques. There's a reason why earth is stronger than water—and it's because of how it absorbs water. "It's only a matter of time until one of us hits you at this rate."

"I told you we should have left them alone!" Kin had been quiet up until now, where she practically
exploded at her teammates. "But you two just had to ignore me!"

"I wouldn't be talking if I were you, deadweight—not after what happened yesterday with your little hangover!" Zaku snapped at Kin.

"You guys were the one who made me go to that party!" Kin was not happy. "Maybe if you guys didn't make me go on my own, I wouldn't have been so hungover…"

"You didn't have to drink…" Dosu remarked. "Why would you even do something so reckless, knowing that the second part of the Chuunin exams was the day right after?"

"Well, because I didn't want to seem so out of place—have you ever considered that?!" Kin threw a handful of mud at Dosu, who was quick to use his arm to block it.

Unfortunately, Dosu used his wrong arm as he quickly found out when mud splattered all over the metal gauntlet on his right arm. "Look what you did!"

Well, this is an unexpected development. Like, holy shit—I was expecting a confrontation. Instead, I managed to create an opening for a team dispute and just…wow.

"Internal conflict within a team shows poor stability!" I nearly shrieked when I saw that Lee was standing right next to me. For someone who's Jounin-sensei was anything but discreet, Lee did a good job at showing up undetected…

It was either that, or he managed to show up while I was distracted with the train wreck that was Zaku, Dosu, and Kin fighting with each other…

"Hey, squirrel!" It took me a moment to notice the blurry brown splotch (the squirrel) on green (Lee).

"Oh, I came across the poor little thing when he had an explosive tag on his back," Lee was quick to say as he looked at the squirrel on his shoulder.

…

"I told you that someone would come across the squirrel, Meganekko." Sai sounded so pleased with himself.

"I guess you were right!" I grinned. "Thanks Lee!"

"O-Oh, it is nothing, Chōko-san!" I'm kinda regretting not having my glasses on hand, because I totally want to see the nervous look on Lee's face right now.

*Splat!*

Are you—are you serious? Zaku, Dosu, and Kin are having a mud fight and I…I just can't even. This is so out of place, that it isn't funny—okay, maybe it is. I mean, these three are with Orochimaru and are quite capable of killing people, like the rest of us…except I doubt they'll show the hesitance most of us have. And having taken that into consideration, instead of trying to kill us, as Zaku had practically boasted he would, they are fighting each other with mud.

"Should we just leave them?" Sai decided to ask me.

"I can carry Naruto-kun if you want me to," Haku offered.

"I dunno, I think we should watch them some more…wait—Lee, what scroll did your team get?" I'm curious since we have an extra Earth scroll on us.
"We have a Heaven scroll," Lee replied. "Though, I think I should be returning to my team right now…but I cannot leave any of you alone!"

Even though I'm quite sure we can handle the situation ourselves, it doesn't hurt to have a little more help.

"And this is for carving your name into that tree!" Kin suddenly yelled as she shoved a handful of mud into Zaku's face.

"You did what?!" Please tell me that Zaku isn't referring to the Tree of Harmony!

"It's just a fucking tree!" Zaku yelled before getting punched right in the face. "Ow, what the hell, Kin?!"

The shift from mud throwing to sudden violence should have keyed me in to a change in situation… it should have. However, I was too busy being pissed at Zaku for even saying that about the Tree of Harmony, because it was anything but a tree. It was more than that, and the fact that Zaku carved his name into the tree—the fuck, man?! And then he has the gall to say something like that?!

He is so dead.

"Take it back!" Kin yelled as she tackled Zaku onto the ground. The two of them rolled across the mud before coming to a complete stop. Kin now sat on top of Zaku, effectively pinning him to the ground as she straddled him. With his arms restrained to his sides, Zaku was helpless to stop Kin as she continued to punch him in the face. "Take it back, you son of a bitch!"

Crack!

There was a sickening crack that resounded upon Kin's fist coming in contact with Zaku's nose. I already know from experience that Zaku's nose was broken…and he deserved it! The fastest way to make enemies in Konoha is to insult the Tree of Harmony. We really take things personally when people speak ill of it.

Though, it does beg the question as to why Kin would take it just as personally. Really, she's never been inside the tree to get the full experience…has she? Oh dammit, how did Karin miss them? Then again, the Tree of Harmony is a tourist spot, so Karin could have mistaken them for tourists…

But seriously, how long have Zaku, Dosu, and Kin been spying on us, anyways? You know what—screw it! I'm done thinking about things, especially when it involves things that don't really matter right now because Kin is totally beating the shit out of Zaku, while Dosu did nothing but watch as he stood up.

Blood was spurting out of Zaku's nose as he screamed, "Dosu, get this bitch off me!"

"I can't!" Dosu exclaimed as he started making funny poses that made no sense until it hit me that he was being controlled.

And it was at that moment that it finally came to my attention that Team Asuma was within the vicinity. I remembered Lee, but I gone and forgotten that Team Asuma eventually made their way to the confrontation between Team Kakashi and whatever team Dosu, Zaku, and Kin were part of. I nearly slapped myself in the forehead when I noticed the kunai on the ground by Dosu's feet. A long, thin strip of white cloth was tied to the kunai, the ends extending toward a couple of bushes where I could make out a very familiar spiky ponytail coming from a certain Nara.

Everything is starting to make sense—Kin's spontaneous violence wasn't from her. It was from Ino.
Ino is controlling Kin right now, and Shikamaru has Dosu trapped…which leaves my brother, Chōji, watching over Ino's body, most likely.

Of course, the white cloth tied to the kunai most likely came from Chōji. After all, the white cloth is the very same thing we both used as bandages to wrap around our arms. The cloth had been used to help Shikamaru extend his range in order to trap Dosu in his Kagemane. This generation's Ino-Shika-Chō trio is definitely a force not to be reckoned with.

"You guys can come out now." There's no use hiding now that I've found you, ahaha…

"Should've figured that you'd eventually find us…" And there's everyone's favorite lazy bastard, making Dosu look ridiculous as ever, all while looking as ridiculous as well.

"I was wondering when you three were going to come out from there." Haku's honestly more perceptive than I will ever be…

"Is she okay?" Sai asked, most likely referring to Ino's unconscious body, of which Chōji was carrying.

"Of course she is!" Chōji was quick to reassure Sai. "Though, maybe you should ask her yourself…assuming she isn't too busy beating that jerk up."

"I…am…perfectly…fine!" Kin said in between punches.

It took Sai a couple of seconds to make the connection. "Oh, so Flower Girl is that one girl who was with Megane!"

Megane, in case anyone is wondering, is Chōjūrō. Of course, Chōjūrō and I would get a nickname referring to the fact that we both wore glasses. Though, to be honest, it's a rather flattering nickname, considering what I've seen in my past life. Us glasses-wearing characters sure do seem to be rather popular. In some cases, it's a charm point, ahaha…

Aaaand that's enough for this self-esteem boosting session—now time to focus back on the current situation.

"Ino's part of the Yamanaka clan, so she's capable of taking control of others when the situation calls for it," I explained to Sai. There are a lot of drawbacks to it, which is why there is a reliance on strategy and teamwork to make it work.

"The Yamanaka clan is truly admirable." Lee was certainly impressed.

"So is there any reason why it took you guys so long to do something?" Not that I mind or anything, I mean the Oto-nin weren't exactly doing any better before Team Asuma intervened.

"We were going to jump in, but you guys seemed to have everything under control," Chōji replied as he carefully made his way through the muddy terrain towards us. Shikamaru kept his distance, as so to keep Dosu occupied.

"Of course, then Ino had to jump in when that Oto-nin opened his big mouth," Shikamaru remarked. "How troublesome…"

"He spoke blasphemy!" Ino was not going easy on Zaku as she continued to make Kin punch the male Oto-nin in the face. "Just a fucking tree—I'll show you, you bastard!"

"Uhhh…Ino, I think that's enough!" Look, I know Zaku pretty much deserves what he's getting, but
I'd rather Ino not accidentally, you know...*kill* the guy. "C'mon, you're going to kill him at this rate—do you *really* want that?"

Zaku whimpered when Kin's fist was literally centimeters away from his face, Ino having deciding stop and mull over the question I've asked. A minute passed and Kin removed her fist. Slowly, she got off Zaku and stood up, making a face when noticed the blood on her hands.

"Eeugh, now that I think about it—maybe I shouldn't have been so rough...but then again, you need to learn when to keep some things to yourself," Kin said before roughly kicking Zaku in the side. "If you act up, I'll kill this girl, so do try to behave yourself."

Ino sure knew how to make threats... God, she takes after her father so much... It's no surprise that Inoichi is part of the Torture and Interrogation Force. At this rate, Ino is going to end up there as well. So this is how Ino developed when she's still friends with Sakura...sure, Ino still has a crush on Sasuke, but Ino has flourished alongside Sakura.

"Ino-san, watch out!" Lee suddenly exclaimed.

Without any warning, Kin was forcefully pushed backwards by an attack coming from Zaku's hand. Even after all that has happened, Zaku *still* had the gall to push his luck. What really bugged me was that the muddy terrain I had created ended up being used to Zaku's advantage as shown by how fast Kin was moving across the mud.

An unwelcomed sense of déjà vu came when I saw Kin's body crash into a tree, back first. The impact of the crash was enough to cause Kin to cough up blood before her body hit the ground.

"Ino!" Chōji yelled, as I was pretty sure that whatever bodily harm Kin had just received was transferred over to Ino.

"Shit!" Shikamaru swore.

*Oh fuck, has it been five minutes already?*

"So five minutes is the jutsu's limit, isn't it?" Dosu asked the question I had hope he wouldn't. "And that girl's jutsu—she can transfer her spirit into her opponent's body and take control of their body, but..."

*Fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck*!

"Though, from the looks of that internal bleeding, it seems that killing Kin would kill her too," Fuck, Dosu saw through the bluff!

"You...bastards would seriously hurt your own teammate?" Ino was shocked with this discovery, as shown through the expression on Kin's face.

Honestly, it shouldn't be that surprising that shinobi from other villages would act this way. While Konohagakure values teamwork, other villages might not hold the same viewpoint. Considering how the Oto-nin are with Orochimaru—it only makes sense. That still doesn't make it any less shocking.

"Our goals are not the stupid scrolls nor to safely complete this exam," Dosu explained.

"We're here for Sasuke!" Zaku exclaimed before spitting out a tooth. His face was practically unrecognizable after all the physical harm Ino had caused him while controlling Kin's body.

"Of course, that's not all we're here for." I barely had enough time to blink when I suddenly found
myself face to face to what I believe was Dosu's bandaged up face before feeling an unimaginable pain in my stomach.

That motherfucker punched me in the stomach—ulp! I staggered back a few steps before throwing up on the ground, feeling rather sick and disoriented. Just when I thought my shitty vision couldn't get any worse, it did and along with that, my sense of balance decided to crap out on me. I could feel something dripping out of my left ear and it didn't take me long to realize that Dosu ruptured my eardrum...fucking ow.

I could already hear my friends calling out to me and before I could even react, I felt an arm wrap around my shoulders and cold metal pressing against my neck. I had enough experience to know that was a kunai and holy shit—no, do not tell me I'm about to be used as a meat shield by Dosu!

"Any sudden movements, and I'll slit her throat!" God fucking dammit, Dosu!

I am so done with this...like so done. What is my life—to deserve to become this dick's meat shield? I don't want to die, but I am so mad.

"You are so lucky you got the upper hand." Must...resist...urge to jeopardize life—why is it so hard, dammit?!

"I don't think you are in a position to talk," Dosu said as he pressed down on the kunai again.

Fucker was trying to intimidate me!

Stay calm, stay calm—don't do anything you might regret!

"I'll let her go is Sasuke comes with us." Oh not this shit again! "After all, we're only here for him...but, if the situation calls for it, we'll be fine just taking her, instead."

Shit, shit, shit, shit!

Why am I the bargaining chip?! This is so not fair! Can't I get a break from this sort of shit?!

"I'll go...just don't hurt her." Sasuke, noooo!

Someone just slap me—wake me up from this nightmare! I'm done being in this position! I'm not useless...so why does it feel like I am? Why?

Why, why, why, why?

I really wanted to cry out of frustration. I was so close, but then a loud cracking sound caught me by surprise... Well, it caught everyone by surprise. What happened right after was just as ridiculous as it sounded. Seemingly, out of fucking nowhere, Neji came swinging down on a vine, à la Tarzan and knocked Dosu and me onto the ground.

Thud!

It was a rather painful and disorienting fall, and maybe a bit nerve-wracking because I still had a freaking kunai at my neck. I mean, freaking heck—that could have killed me, but it didn't! And the only reason it didn't, was because I managed to use this opportunity to grab the kunai out of Dosu's hand. It was a good thing I did, because the sharp metal blade of the kunai was starting to dig into my skin and I think it might have actually cut my neck a bit. Nothing too seriously, but I did feel something on my neck.
This wouldn't have happened if I had my hitai-ate and scarf on—where are they, anyways? Forget that! Get off me, Dosu, you're heavy—huh?!

Whoa!

I was about ready to shove Dosu off of me, when someone else managed to do that, instead. Almost right after, someone helped me off the ground.

"Are you okay?" It was Tenten. "O-Oh, your neck!"

Yup, that's definitely a cut… "I'm fine—I got the kunai before it could do any serious damage. What's going on?"

"I think you might want these back." Sasuke caught me by surprise when he suddenly put my glasses back on my face. Though, considering how I was almost used as a bargaining chip, it does explain why he isn't with Sakura and Naruto…

I blinked a few times before looking around to get a good look at my surroundings now that my glasses were back on my face. My vision blurred a bit before it cleared when I came across the scene of Neji beating the ever-loving crap out of Dosu. I winced when I noticed that Neji's Byakugan was activated—he was using the Jūken on Dosu. Just, eeugh—hope you like internal bleeding, ya bastard. That's what you get for using me as a meat shield and rupturing my eardrum!

Ugh, everything just seems to spin whenever I move my head. This is going to be a problem, unless something is done about my ruptured eardrum…

"H-Here, let me heal that for you," Sasuke said as he walked closer to me. "Sorry if I can't do much…"

"It's fine!" C'mon, Sasuke, cheer up a bit! Please? "Just do your best…okay?"

"Okay…" For the most part, Sasuke sounded relieved.

I think now, things are going to be a bit okay…of course, I spoke too soon as Kin suddenly yelled, "Get this son of a bitch off of me!"

Oh shit, we forgot about Kin—I mean, Ino! Well, Ino in Kin's body…so Kino it is! In any case, with me having been used as a hostage, no one really had time to keep an eye on anyone, besides me…

So while everyone was trying to be careful, so as to not agitate Dosu anymore, Zaku had managed to make his way over to Kino (until Ino is out of Kin's body, this is the nickname I'm enforcing for the body). He did a little role reversal, so now it was he who had Kino pinned underneath him as he punched her in the face.

Considering how close Dosu held that kunai to my neck, I doubt Ino was going to risk going back into her body, as her reanimation would probably count as a "sudden movement" by Dosu. And thanks to Zaku's role reversal, Ino couldn't end the Shintenshin even if she wanted to. As Zaku continued to punch Kino, marks started to appear on Ino's body. Her face was taking a beating and if it weren't for what happened next, I would have thrown a kunai at Zaku's head.

What had happened was that a certain pink-haired kunoichi decided to wake up and ask, "Who…did that to Ino…?"

Oh my god…what the fuck am I looking at?

I got a horrific sense of déjà vu just looking at Sakura as she slowly walked forward. Black marks
were covering the left side of her face, trailing all the way down to her leg. What were once gentle-looking green eyes were now dark purple eyes, full of hatred.

"Who did it?" Sakura asked again.

And like an idiot, Zaku proudly answered, "I did it!"

I already had an idea what was going to happen…and when Sakura disappeared within the blink of an eye, leaving only a trail of leaves where she last stood, I prepared myself for the worst. I wasn't that surprised to see her appear right next to Zaku and Kino. I didn't even flinch when Sakura grabbed Zaku by the neck and pulled him off of Kino.

*BAM!*

I winced when I saw Sakura smash Zaku's face into the tree that Kino had crashed into earlier. That, added up to the fact that Zaku still had injuries from the beating Kino had done to him earlier…yeah, that nose is definitely broken and he's gonna need some serious medical care if he wants to make it through the end of the day.

Zaku's body crumpled to the ground shortly afterwards and if it wasn't for his groaning, I would have mistaken him for dead. A civilian would be dead by now after going through what Zaku had experienced. Zaku was only lucky that he wasn't a civilian.

"You think you're so proud of yourself for hurting my friend, huh?" Sakura said as she grabbed onto Zaku's arms by the wrist. She placed her right foot flat on Zaku's back and started to forcefully pull on his arms, her foot pushing his body in the opposite direction. "Huh?!"

Never had I ever considered that such canon events could play out in such a way. It seemed so similar to what I had seen in the manga…except, unlike in the manga, it wasn't Sasuke who was dislocating Zaku's arms.

It was Sakura.

"Shannaro!"

*SNAP!*

Sakura never liked to hurt people. She would if she had to, but that never meant she liked it. She preferred to heal people—especially if they were her friends. But to see her do this to someone like Zaku…something was definitely wrong with her. Even if Sakura was just being vindictive towards the treatment Ino had received, it still felt out of character for her to have a sadistic side to her.

Laughing upon hearing Zaku's pained screams…what happened to the pink-haired girl who wanted to become a medic-nin because of an incident during her Academy days? What happened to the girl who always smiled and cared for others' well-beings?

What happened to our friend?

"That's what you get for hurting my friend!" Sakura spat as she roughly kicked Zaku aside.

None of us knew how to react—Neji had even stopped attacking Dosu, who was currently curled up on the ground, in pain. It was just so horrifying to see how our friend was acting right now.

Sasuke never looked so terrified. "N-No…"
Slowly, Sasuke started walking toward Sakura, taking a step at a time as the pink-haired girl debated whether or not she should continue kicking Zaku while he was down, kill him, both, or leave him be. Then Kino sat up and Sakura turned her attention away from Zaku.

"Did you hurt Ino, too?!" Sakura was quick to grab Kino by the shirt and hold a fist to her face. "Did you?!!"

Kino's eyes were so wide with shock. Out of all of us, Ino had known Sakura the longest. The two were the closest of friends…and for Ino to witness such out-of-character behavior from the person she knew the longest… It was almost as though she couldn't recognize Sakura.

It probably didn't help that Sakura couldn't recognize that Ino was currently harboring Kin's body. Having said that, it explained why Sakura would be so quick to make threats to a person she didn't recognize as a friend. And it was that realization that shocked Ino the most.

"S-Sakura?" Ino must have been so shaken up, because what came out of Kin's mouth was by far the most pitiful voice I had ever heard. It was almost as though one wrong thing could just break her…

"Don't talk to me like you know me so well!" Sakura snapped. "Now answer me! Did you hurt Ino?!!"

By now, tears were streaming down Kin's cheeks. Had Ino not been so shaken up, she would have most likely ended the jutsu by now. But with her current predicament, Ino was at a loss. "S-Sakura…it's me—Ino."

And just like that, everything went quiet.

...

Minutes passed and Kin's body went limp, while Ino's body reanimated itself. Now back in her body, Ino coughed a few times, blood trickling down the side of her mouth. Chōji tried to ask her something, but Ino stopped him as she stood up. She wobbled a bit as she turned her attention to Sakura, who had only just dropped Kin's body.

Sakura seemed conflicted as she stood there, just staring at the bodies before her feet. Maybe it was the idea that she had almost hurt her friend…it was most likely that. And yet, the marks on her body were still there.

Ino was about ready to walk over to Sakura, but then Sasuke got to the pink-haired kunoichi first. Déjà vu crossed my mind with what I saw next, and instead of Sakura hugging Sasuke…it was the other way around. So much role reversal and yet…this one didn't horrify me as much. It just made me sad when I heard Sasuke say, "I'm sorry, Sakura…I'm so very sorry…"

Despite what I had told Sasuke—despite what I had told myself…

"It's all my fault…" Sasuke sounded as if he was about ready to burst into tears. "That you're like this…"

"It's my fault, too…"

Sasuke still blamed himself…and so did I. Even though we really shouldn't be doing this—it just wasn't healthy. And yet, just seeing what had happened to Sakura…
Why?

Why did it have to be Sakura?

Every single consequence that came with the mark… was now going to be pushed onto Sakura. Will she even be able to use medical ninjutsu? I doubt it, since the cursed mark will eat away at her chakra whenever she uses it or however it was that it had affected Sasuke. Does Sakura even know what’s happened to her?

What will she think of us when she finds out?

I felt like crying again, even though I was the one who had told Sasuke that it was nobody’s fault. None of us could have prevented this—not with how these events have deviated…and yet, the guilt still lingered. How was Sakura going to be a medic-nin if the cursed mark kept activating whenever she used her chakra? Of course, unlike Sasuke, Sakura didn't have the Sharingan, so it could affect her differently… That still didn't erase the consequence of the mark corroding her mind, as Orochimaru had intended it to do with Sasuke.

"I'm so sorry…” Sasuke sniffed. "I'm sorry…”

Slowly, the marks on Sakura's body began to recede until they had completely disappeared. It was shortly afterwards that she collapsed onto the ground and that was when everyone finally reacted. We all made our way to Sakura, taking care to watch our step as we walked across the still-muddy terrain.

Sasuke was currently tending to Sakura, checking if she was hurt in way. Sakura looked so exhausted and tried her best to say that she was fine when Ino asked her if she was okay, when she really was not. Upon noticing how hurt Ino was, Sakura had tried to heal Ino, only for Sasuke to stop her.

Sasuke explained that Sakura was in no condition to do any healing and as much as Sakura probably didn't want to admit, he was right. And it was at that moment that everyone else realized how dangerous our situation was. Our only capable healer of a friend was incapable of healing.

Not in her current state, that is.

"We should leave,” Haku was quick to suggest.

With Dosu, Zaku, and Kin all incapacitated, now was probably a good time to leave, without any more needless confrontations. It didn't feel right, but Dosu was still conscious, so he was probably capable of activating his seal (the one that sent up a flare)... not so sure about Zaku or Kin, though. Still, they weren't completely helpless. Everything after this would be up to them. So if anything bad were to happen, it would fall entirely on Dosu for not doing anything.

…

…

It rained later that day and rather than separate, we all stayed together, high up on a branch— completely out of sight to anyone who didn't look closely. At the moment, Sasuke was trying his hardest to heal my ruptured eardrum. The most he had been able to do, earlier, before Sakura surprised us with her awakening, was heal the cut on my neck.

I had to be carried all the way to our current location because I couldn't walk straight without stumbling or falling. Lee had almost challenged Neji to a spar when Neji had been quick to offer to
carry me. In the end, it was Neji who carried me on his back, while Lee took to carrying Naruto, who was still asleep. About halfway to our current location, Shikamaru slapped the hell out of Naruto and woke him up.

Naruto nearly attacked us for that, considering the situation he had once been before blacking out. Then he noticed how some of us weren't exactly looking all too well (Sakura, Ino, and I), and freaked out. Overall, it was typical Naruto behavior appropriate for waking up after missing out on everything that had happened.

We ended up giving the extra Earth scroll to Team Asuma, who had been struggling throughout the entirety of yesterday with a hangover, due to that party at the Uchiha compound…

In hindsight, we should have just gotten more drinks instead of bringing out the booze…too late to do anything about that, now. That aside, Team Gai had already gotten their own Earth scroll and upon finding out that all of our teams had been given Heaven scrolls, I felt something was up. I'm pretty sure Neji and Shikamaru caught on as well, but we didn't really say anything.

For now, I was just waiting patiently for Sasuke to finish healing my ruptured eardrum. I would be happy to have my sense of balance back (Dosu's attack messed with my vestibular system), as well as my hearing in my left ear, thank you very much… Meanwhile with Ino, she was waiting for her turn to get healed, her face having swollen up a bit from the beating Zaku had given her. Unlike Zaku, she at least didn't have her nose broken, but she did have a black eye and lost a tooth (last baby tooth, by the way).

The healing process took longer than usual, since Sasuke only had minor medic-nin training. When Sakura tried to help by healing Ino, it soon came to our attention that it was impossible for her to use medical ninjutsu without causing her pain. Sakura had tried to hide this, but upon seeing her cursed mark activate, Ino stopped her.

"Just stop—you're hurting yourself," Ino said.

Sakura frowned. "But you're hurt!"

"I don't care!" Ino snapped. "I'd rather stay like this than have you hurt yourself for me."

"Ino…" Sakura seemed touched, but at the same time, she was sad. The pain and the fact that she couldn't heal her friend must have really bothered her.

I wasn't surprised to find that Sasuke was crying after seeing that. "Sasuke…"

"Sorry—I just can't…" Sasuke exhaled shakily. "It should have been me, not Sakura… At least with me, it wouldn't make that much of a difference because I barely have any training, compared to her…"

"Do you…really think that?" Sakura asked Sasuke.

"Think that…it feels like that." Sasuke seemed so close to breaking down. "I was supposed to have gotten that mark—not you. You could have died…you could have died, Sakura! Why did you do that?!"

Silence…

…

…
"Why?" Sasuke's voice cracked as he asked again.

"Because you've been through too much," was Sakura's response. She smiled reassuringly at Sasuke, who just stared at her, agape. "That's why."

It had never occurred to me, that Sakura would have ever made a decision just so someone, like Sasuke, wouldn't have to deal with any more unwanted burdens. Losing Shisui, then his entire family, and finally, his older brother…Orochimaru's cursed seal (mark, whatever the fuck it is—it doesn't matter) would have just been another thing to add to Sasuke's list of troubles. Even though she couldn't really use her medical ninjutsu—the one thing that she had been so proud of—because of what she had done for Sasuke, Sakura didn't seem to mind. She didn't even blame Sasuke.

Just like Sasuke hadn't blamed Naruto for Itachi's departure from Konoha.

"S-Sakura…" Sasuke was at a loss for words. "You idiot, you—!"

Sasuke was cut off when Ino suddenly pushed Sakura towards him. With Sakura so close to him, Sasuke just wrapped his arms around her waist and started sobbing. Sakura was absolutely stunned, not knowing what to do with her current position. A moment passed before Sakura smiled and patted Sasuke reassuringly on the back.

"It's okay!" Sakura said. "It's okay…"

There was something about watching this scene as it occurred, that made my heart ache. I just…I should be happy with how things are, because Sakura is still alive. She survived…she's here…and she doesn't blame anyone.

I guess…it's because the feeling is so bittersweet. It sure seems like it…

We're alive.

And I guess I should be happy with that. No one died…

Smile.

Because that's all I can really do right now.

"Here, Chōko-san…" Neji caught me by surprise when he handed me my scarf and hitai-ate. "Ino gave it to me so that I could give them to you."

"Why didn't she give them to me?" Why did Ino even have these on her?

"She would have, but she's busy right now…" Neji directed my attention to Ino, who was currently talking to Sai. It seems as though Ino was explaining something to Sai…probably in regards to his emotions, or lack thereof.

Still, why did Ino have my stuff—oh, Sai probably had them…well, then why did he give them to me earlier? I should just stop asking questions and focus on what's happening now. It honestly felt good to cover my neck again—especially after all that had happened. I had never felt so exposed…

"Thank you, Neji," I said after I adjusted my scarf a bit. I still wore my hitai-ate around my neck…the only time I'll ever wear it on my forehead is when I'm wearing Rin's clothes. Apart from that, I'm keeping it where it is now—regardless of how impractical it seems. It's my choice of how I wear it, anyways.
"Are you sure you are fine?" Neji asked.

I blinked and forced a smile. "Kind of…I had my eardrum ruptured, got punched in the stomach, and nearly had my throat slit—I still need some time to recover from that."

I purposely left out any mention of yesterday's events—they're pretty self-explanatory anyways.

"Do you need a hug?" I honestly should have expected that from Neji…

I was about ready to say yes, when Lee decided to interrupt us by saying, "If it is an embrace that you need, I will be happy to supply one!"

And promptly right after that, Tenen bonked Lee over the head. "Lee, you idiot!"

Neji seemed so annoyed, Tenen was apologetic, and Lee was just in pain…I snorted before bursting into a fit of laughter. I don't know why I found it funny, but I just did… Laughing never felt so good and it was only until now that I realized that this is the first time since yesterday that I had actually laughed.

I was with friends…and I felt safe. I actually felt safe…and it seems the others felt the same way as well. While Sasuke continued to cry, with Sakura trying her best to comfort him, everyone else was laughing alongside with me. Even Neji and Lee were laughing, despite the former's annoyance and the latter's initial confusion.

It's good to see a return to the lighthearted atmosphere that we usually have with us. Even if it is only for a moment, I really welcome it.

Smile...because you have a reason to.

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As soon as Sasuke calmed down, he focused on healing Ino as best as he could. He was at least able to get rid of Ino's black eye, and minimize the swelling on her face. Though, Sasuke focused more on healing the internal damage that had been done when Kin had crashed into that tree—damage that had been transferred to Ino, due to her Shintenshin. We all left shortly after that, as we all had two scrolls each to our teams.

We still stuck together, helping each other out as we focused on reaching the tower in the center of the Forest of Death. It was still raining, but that made it easier for us to move, as most other Genin would be struggling to find shelter. Honestly, it felt nice to be ahead of most others within the first twenty-four hours.

With Neji's Byakugan, it really didn't take us that long to reach the tower without any more confrontations. Just making it so long without any troubles was so...refreshing. Even though we were moving through the rain, it didn't really bother us. Seriously, after what had happened, things could be a lot worse than rain.

Also, I like rain…it made me really, really happy, despite the fact that my clothes were completely drenched. Ino was annoyed, as was Shikamaru. Chōji was trying to make the best of the situation and Naruto was having the time of his life annoying Sasuke by jumping in the puddles, making sure the water would splash on the Uchiha. Haku and Sai were rather protective of Sakura, asking if she was okay. Sakura seemed a bit uncomfortable, but that may be because her teammates never acted this way towards her...they never had a reason to until now.
Lee seemed to be taking after Naruto with the whole jumping in puddles thing, though he was trying to turn it into a contest with Neji. Neji was irritated and Tenten was just laughing awkwardly.

It almost felt like everything was back to normal...of course, we still had an exam to finish. Hopefully, there's a place for us to change out of our wet clothes—where the hell are we going to stay until the time limit is up? I think I should worry about that after we enter the tower.

It was at this point, that we all went our separate ways, since there were multiple doors around the area of the building where we were at, and we were under the assumption that it was one team to a door.

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Iruka was completely surprised when he appeared in front of Naruto, Sasuke, and I, shortly after we had opened the scrolls, which turned out to be summoning scrolls. I don't think it had ever crossed his mind that his former students could actually finish the second part of the Chuunin exams so early. And after nearly an entire minute of silence between the four of us, Iruka was caught completely off-guard yet again when Naruto, Sasuke, and I tackled him onto the ground.

We were just so happy to see the face of someone so familiar who made us feel safe. It also helps that it had been Iruka who had come to our rescue, nearly five years ago when Orochimaru made his first appearance into our lives. Naruto was crying, saying how much he had missed Iruka.

I found myself crying as well, mostly because I was so relieved. We were definitely safe with Iruka around...he wasn't considered for ANBU for nothing.

Sasuke didn't cry, but he did laugh. He had been so tense up until now, where he was finally loosening up. And then he passed out on Iruka. Poor Sasuke was probably just as relieved as I was—maybe even more.

"He didn't even wait for me to say that you three passed the second test..." Iruka sighed, smiling afterwards as he ruffled Sasuke's hair. "It must have been rough, huh?"

Rough is an understatement...

"Well, remind me to buy you three a round of ramen after this is over." Iruka seemed so proud of us. "Other than that, congratulations for passing the second test."

We did it.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, yeah, I know it's been a while, but school bitch-slapped the hell out of me and just...college. Just college...so I made this chapter extra-long to make up for the late update!

In case anyone asks about Chōko's breakdown at the beginning of the chapter, yes, she thinks her body is fucked up because of how she stands out amongst her family. Have you ever wondered why she takes a moment to boost her self-esteem? That's why... Chōko still has issues that were carried over from her past life to now. Remember, her
fast-metabolism and her Akimichi genes are the reason she's as thing as she is (those two things do not go together in this clan).

And while it seems as though she has accepted her life as Akimichi Chōko, she feels conflicted about this to a point as to—why her? This is her first time actually questioning why she is even here. Chōko has her ups and downs—she is only human. She also has some things she has been keeping to herself, so do keep that in mind.

Serious matters aside, Sakura lives! Unfortunately, that cursed mark is preventing her from using her chakra—you can see why Sasuke would feel like it's his fault. After all, Sakura was the one to give Sasuke his first step into the field of medical ninjutsu. And then there's the fact that the reason Ino is the way she is, is because she has also flourished as well, upon seeing how Sakura was improving. Their friendship is also strong and not strained.

Sasuke is much more open with his emotions, here, than his canon counterpart is because of his upbringing. He cries, he worries, he protects—Sasuke cares for his friends deeply. This fic might have started out slow, but it was all set-up for future events.

I want to say that, originally, things were going to play out like in canon…but then things deviated along the line, much like how they have for Chōko. Sometimes, I don't see these openings until later, so a lot of you were expecting Chōko to get bit—and I had that idea in mind…

But then Sakura popped up and caught everyone by surprise. As you guys can assume, Orochimaru is pissed off that things went differently than he had planned originally. He also has a rather deep grudge against Chōko for the crotch punch, considering Dosu has mentioned that they weren't just there for Sasuke…they were also there for Chōko.

And I wasn't kidding when I said I implemented SCIENCE to into Naruto…I just happened to implement it to chakra. Considering how weird chakra is, up to how it came into existence, it might as well be a rule manipulator to existing laws of science. Chōko does do a lot of things when she is bored. So expect some science from time to time, because Chōko likes to complain about it.

And if you think this is weird, I applied the concept of genetics to Kingdom Hearts when it comes to magic. I even extended it to Black and White Magic…I have too much time on myself sometimes. This is why I have contemplated on taking chemistry as my second major at my university (apart from Honey Lemon in Big Hero 6 reminding me how cool chemistry can be when it isn't annoying)...I probably will do it when I find the time (and funds).

Oh, and you have ChibiFoxAI to thank for Neji-zan (Neji as Tarzan). The branch he was standing on broke and he grabbed a nearby vine and…yeah, that's basically what happened. By the by, you guys should really read Party at Sasuke's Place by ChibiFoxAI—it's literally the story of what happened at that party last night that left mostly everyone hungover. I'll be referencing that from time to time—especially since someone, like Kin, has reasons to because she is the only one from her team to have attended it.

Here's the link to it: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11206995/1/Party-at-Sasuke-s-Place

Speaking of Kin, she's acting more differently than ever and again, you have that party
to blame…but other things as well. Just keep in mind how personally she took when she shoved mud in Zaku's face, saying that that was for him carving his name into the Tree of Harmony. Also recall how they were all spying on everyone for an unknown amount of time…basically, something else in the process of a deviation.

And Mizu Deppō translates into Water Gun—YES, Chōko went into Pokémon for that name for her technique. Oh, and in case anyone is wondering, Deko means forehead…which is Sai's nickname for Sakura. It isn't ugly—it's forehead. Sakura doesn't take it personally, because it's Sai and because he doesn't refer to its size specifically.

And I think that's it for this chapter. Sorry it took so long again, so I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Until next time, everyone!

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